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Which MLA Asked The Year's Puffiest Questions?
Simon Rich Counts His Chickens

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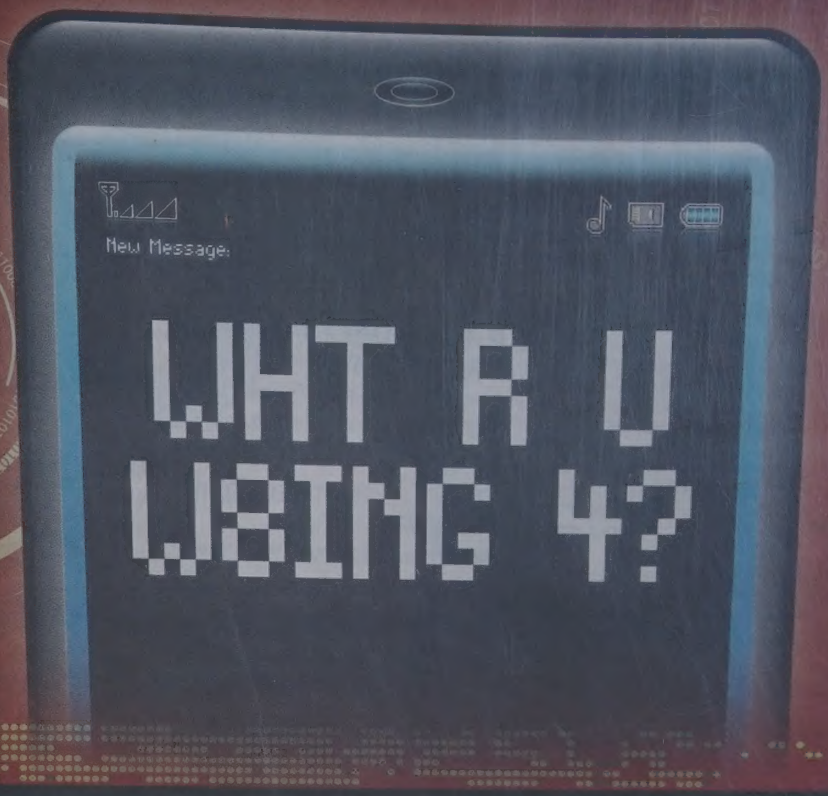

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Comics, crosswords, and more.

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Plus reviews of *Doubt*, *The Reader*, *Valkyrie*, and more Christmas blockbusters.

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Ian Tyson, Horizon Stage, Jan. 7

DECEMBER 25
christmas | **CHRISTMAS DAY** Happy holidays from all of us at *SEE Magazine*.

DECEMBER 26
music | **DB BUXTON REVUE** Edmonton's favourite busker is still riding the steam from his self-titled debut album released earlier this year. Despite his step up from the street, we're pretty sure he still doesn't mind people throwing cash his way. New City, 8 p.m.

DECEMBER 27
music | **CORVID LORAX** Sick and tired of all the grickle grass growing in the city? Miss the sight of the truffula trees? Well, there's still one more Lorax showing the tricky Once-ler who's boss. You can find him at The ARTery, around 9 p.m.

DECEMBER 28
music | **REGGAE SUNDAYS** Fresh from headlining the Hip Hop for Hunger concert, Souljah Fyah returns to their regular spot at The Haven Social Club to turn up the jungle heat on this cold December evening. 6 p.m.

DECEMBER 29
comedy | **HIT OR MISS MONDAYS** What better way to relieve the tension of the holidays than sitting in on some of Edmonton's finest amateur comedy? Comic Strip.

DECEMBER 30
film | ***THE DEVIL CAME ON HORSEBACK*** Annie Sundburg and Ricki Stern's film about the treachery in Darfur will give all of us a few more things to be thankful for in the New Year. Steeps Tea Lounge College Plaza, 7 p.m.

DECEMBER 31
gala | **BLACK RIBBON BALL** Speaking of violence in the African/Caribbean community, the West Indian Canadian Cultural Association is taking the lead on bringing awareness to the issue right here in Edmonton. Holiday Inn.

JANUARY 1
pain | **NEW YEAR HANGOVER** Hangovers happen when your dehydrated organs steal water from your brain in a mad attempt to moisturize. This causes the brain to shrink and pull on the membranes attaching it to your skull. This equals a headache. Now you know.

JANUARY 2
exhibit | ***30 YEARS YOUNG: THE EDMONTON OILERS 30TH ANNIVERSARY SHOWCASE*** Remember that time in December when the Oilers lost 9-2 to the Blackhawks? Man, that sucked. But what a memory, eh? Art Gallery of Alberta.

JANUARY 3
comedy | **TOM LISKE** All comedians have career ups and downs. Liske's first up happened when he moved from Manitoba to L.A. His first low was when he moved back north to Saskatchewan. No wonder he's a cynic. The Comedy Factory, 8 & 10:30 p.m.

JANUARY 4
workshop | **WOMEN ONLY BICYCLE REPAIR** Because you don't need some hopped-up testosterone freak telling you how to fix your bike. Edmonton Bicycle Commuters' Society.

JANUARY 5
exhibit | ***IMAGINING SCIENCE*** The Art Gallery of Alberta slaps science in the face and leaves it looking marvelous.

JANUARY 6
exhibit | ***HEIGHTS OF FASHION*** The Bata Shoe Museum had a few heels kicking around, so instead of donating them to charity they gave them to the Royal Alberta Museum. Sure, they're hand-me-downs, but a sexy pair of pumps is a sexy pair of pumps.

JANUARY 7
concert | **IAN TYSON** If practice makes perfect, then Tyson is probably as close to being a flawless musician as it's possible to be. Dude's been playing for 50 years! Horizon Stage, 7:30 p.m.

JANUARY 8
storytelling | **LAUGH LIKE THE DEVIL** Who says the devil doesn't have a sense of humour? It would be a sin to miss Bethany Ellis, Renée Englot, and Wendy Edey's spoken word at Rosie's Bar and Grill. 7 p.m.

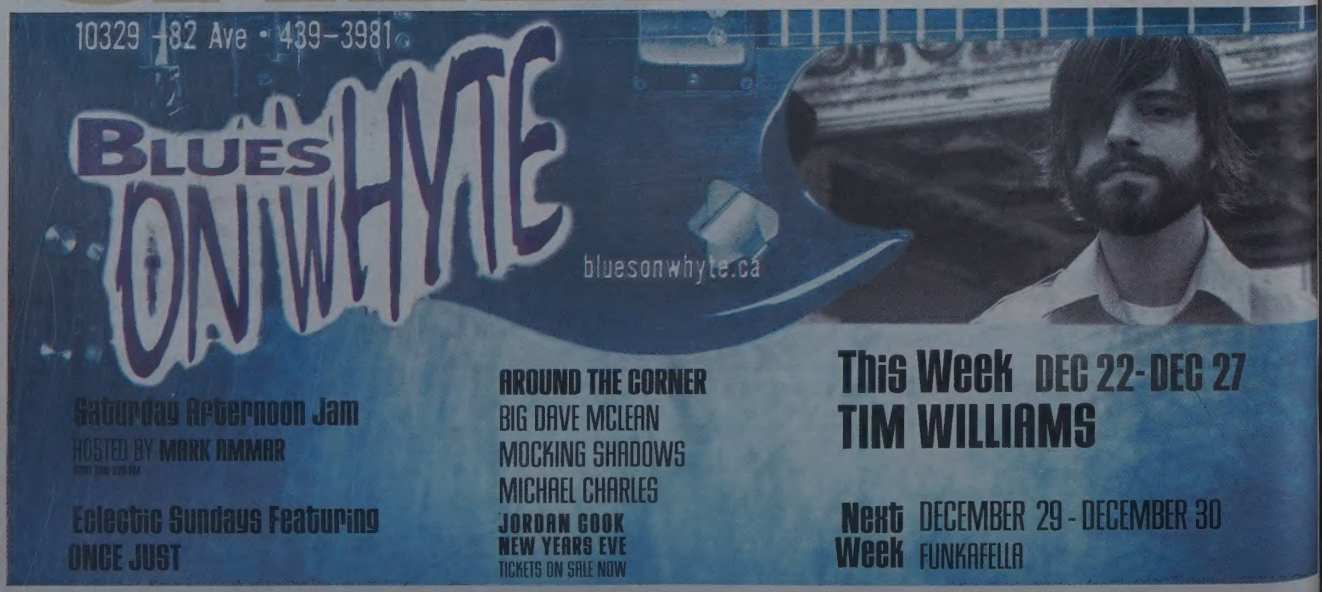
30 Years Young, Art Gallery of Alberta, Jan. 2

CALENDAR

exhibit | January 5 "THE ART GALLERY OF ALBERTA SLAPS SCIENCE IN THE FACE AND LEAVES IT LOOKING MARVELOUS."

see magazine's two-week forecast of events in edmonton

listings: city pg 16 | music pg 21 | film caps pg 26 | arts pg 32



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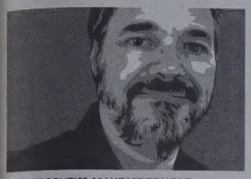
"CAN THE MINISTER DESCRIBE HOW THIS PROJECT WILL CONTRIBUTE TO THE REVITALIZATION OF EDMONTON'S INNER CITY?

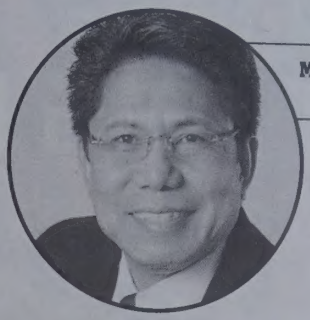
COMMENTARY • THE PUFFIES | 1,261 words

Pandering Propaganda And Puffball Politics

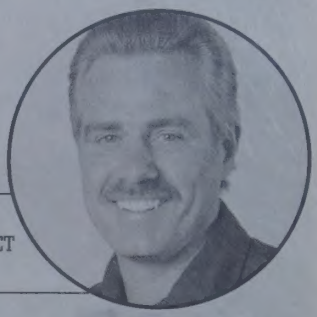


OUTSIDE POLITICS MAURICE TOUGAS

IT'S TIME FOR THE PUFFIE AWARDS! WHICH NEWBIE MLAS FILLED QUESTION PERIOD WITH THE YEAR'S FLUFFIEST QUERIES?



MLA DAVID XIAO: "CAN THE MINISTER TELL US WHAT IS BEING DONE TO EDUCATE ALBERTANS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FIRE SAFETY?"



MLA TONY VANDERMEER: "IT'S TIME TO MOVE ON TO SOME GOOD NEWS. I UNDERSTAND A UNIQUE AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROJECT FOR EDMONTON WAS ANNOUNCED YESTERDAY..."

As regular readers of this column (12 at last count) all know, I was for a time a member of the Alberta legislature.

I kinda hated it. I was honoured to have won, and enjoyed the prestige of the job and the bounteous free food that came with it. (God, how I miss the ATCO Blue Flame Christmas feedbag.) But I found the actual *legislating* part of being a legislator to be unbearable.

While I am relieved not to be a part of that horror show any longer, many of my fellow Alberta Liberal MLAs loved it. They were saddened and justifiably mystified to be defeated. I will never understand why hard-working people dedicated to serving the public would be treated so rudely, but I guess that's politics. And politics, as we all know, sucks.

When the legislature is in session, the MLA's role is to ask questions during question period, and participate in debates on bills and motions. Whether you're in opposition or government, the job is the same. How you go about the job is another matter.

The new pack of Edmonton Tory MLAs have had a session of the legislature under their belt. I thought I'd prowl Hansard, the official record of everything said in the legislature, to see what kind of hard-hitting questions the new guys asked the government.

Sad to say, the newbies have not exactly lit up the chamber with their eloquence. Their questions have been invariably what other MLAs call puffballs, questions as pointed as a Q-Tip that are designed to be batted out of the park by a minister who has the prepared answer ready to recite. In honour of the puffball question, I hereby present the first annual *SEE Magazine* Puffie Award to the Edmonton MLA who best exemplifies the virtues of obsequiousness, toadying, and shamelessness that are the hallmarks of any great Conservative MLA.

Let's take a look at the candidates, and some of their best work.

Take David Xiao, the international man of mystery who defeated hard-working Mo Elsalhy in McClung. Here's a classic question from Mr. X:

Mr. Xiao: "Springtime brings with it increased fire hazards, which can pose a risk to our family's homes and communities.... Can the minister tell us what is being done to educate Albertans on the importance of fire safety?"

Whew! That must have set the leg on fire. Fire safety was a hot topic (sorry) among Edmonton MLAs. Carl Benito of Mill Woods, who defeated the outstanding Alberta Liberal MLA Weslyn Mather, asked this scorcher:

Mr. Benito: "Recent large residential fires in Alberta have resulted in significant amounts of property damage.... What is the government doing to address this concern?"

Here's another query that must have had the minister sweating buckets:

Mr. Benito: "What is your ministry doing to bring more international nurses into Alberta's hospitals and clinics?"

Here's one more Benito gem to round things out.

Mr. Benito: "Mr. Speaker, my first question is to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. I understand you were recently in South Korea on a labour attraction mission. What result did you achieve to meet the workforce needs of the Alberta economy?"

I have a question for Carl Benito: During the election campaign, you promised you would give your MLA salary to charity. How's the search coming, Carl? Is it going as well as O.J. Simpson's search for the real killers?

Naresh Bhardwaj of Edmonton-Ellerslie, who replaced Bharat Agnihotri (the only MLA to get kicked out of the legislature for angering the speaker), asked this scintillating question:

Mr. Bhardwaj: "We have a homeless population that needs to be kept safe in our province.... Can the minister advise the legislature how communities are coping with the need to provide homeless people a safe environment for the night?"

That was followed by:

Mr. Bhardwaj: "There are far too many young people living on the streets. Can the minister tell us what her department is doing to help young people find more secure housing?"

And the hat trick of hackery was completed with this question:

Mr. Bhardwaj: "What is the minister doing to address the long-term issue of homelessness?"

Fred Horne, who defeated outstanding MLA Rick Miller, is a seat filler who came up with (or had written for him) this set of questions:

Mr. Horne: (1) "What is the government doing to address escalating construction costs so Albertans have access to the infrastructure that is critical to both securing our province's future and ensuring a high quality of life for all?"

(2) "Can the minister be specific regarding the techniques or efficiencies that are being applied now to mitigate growing construction costs and reduce delays for the most critical projects?"

(3) "What is the government doing to ensure costs are manageable so that existing infrastructure is properly repaired and maintained in a timely manner?"

Calder MLA Doug Elniski replaced New Democrat Dave Eggen, who could always be counted on to ask a tough question. Elniski, on the other hand ...

Mr. Elniski: "Growth in the capital region has had a significant impact on traffic congestion. You've announced that the new Capital Region Board will be developing a plan to address intermunicipal transit. When will this plan be developed?"

Then there's this one, which is basically a Q&A for a press release:

Mr. Elniski: (1) "I notice that a public consultation on revisions to the occupational health and safety code is underway.... Revisions to the code were made not long ago. Why are we doing it again?"

(2) "Can the minister give us specifics when it comes to some of the revisions being contemplated?"

(3) "What is the deadline for Albertans to submit their thoughts on the draft recommendations?"

Tony Vandermeer of Beverly-Clareview defeated New Democrat Ray Martin, who was for my money the best, most sincere extemporaneous speaker in the house. Martin's searching questions have been replaced by this Pablum:

Mr. Vandermeer: "It's time to move on to some good news. I understand that a unique affordable housing project for Edmonton was announced yesterday.... Can the minister describe how this project will contribute to the revitalization of Edmonton's inner city?"

Edmonton Manning's Peter Sandhu, who replaced deposed Alberta Liberal Dan Backs (who once called the Conservatives "Nazis") came up with these:

Mr. Sandhu: "When can we expect construction to begin on the north section of the Anthony Henday Drive?"

Mr. Sandhu: "When will the province complete the final section of the Anthony Henday Drive in the northeast from the freeway across the river to the Yellowhead highway on the east of the city?"

QP is just a small part of the duties of an MLA during a session; the biggest job is debating government bills. Aside from predictable support for some private member's bills, I could find no evidence that any of the above MLAs said one single word while debating any of the 53 bills that went through the legislature this session.

As you can see, there are some outstanding candidates for the Puffie Award. But our distinguished panel (that would be me) has selected ... Carl "The Crusader" Benito! Carl takes home the Puffie not just because of the utter vacuousness of his questions, but because he asked such a staggering number of them as well. This guy never stopped asking puffball questions that didn't need to be asked.

Kudos, Carl, on your inaugural Puffie. To Fred, Peter, Tony, Doug, Naresh, and David ... better sucking next year.

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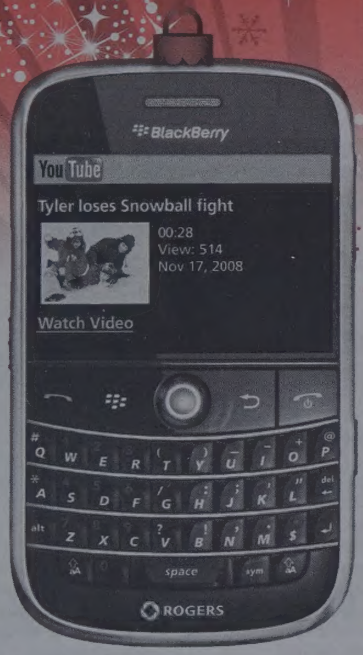

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QUOTE OF THE WEEK

"WE REALLY DO NEED TO APOLOGIZE.

—SONIA MARYN, SPOKESPERSON FOR ALBERTA SENIORS AND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS, FOR A REVERSAL ON PAYING ARTIFICIAL LIMBS
AS QUOTED IN THE *EDMONTON JOURNAL*

WITNESS

DEC. 22, 2008 | 5:06:37 PM | PHOTO BY BEN LEMPHERS

Kieran Garland (left) and his father, Jim Garland, make cell phone calls about other routes after their family's flight to Hawaii via Vancouver was severely delayed.

OUR COMMENT ON THIS WEEK'S NEWS

EDMONTON, ALBERTA, CANADA • BAH, HUMBUG! LUMPS OF IMAGINARY COAL FOR OFFENDING PARTIES IN 2008

We know the holiday season is supposed to be about love for our fellow human beings, good cheer and whatnot, but this year we are full of bah humbug.

Maybe it's the packed malls, or the fact that we haven't seen the sun for almost a week now, but we just can't bring ourselves to offer anyone good cheer on this grey December morning.

Sure 2008 had it's up sides, and we'll get to those next week after we're had a couple days of family and food to mellow out, but right now we've got a bucket of imaginary coal sitting in the *SEE* office that needs to be distributed to offending parties.

So, there's a lump for all the institutions and people who's serious and silly blunders disturbed us this year, in no particular order.

*China for producing the mountains of lead-laden junk for us to put under the Christmas tree each year.

*Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty for the "economic update" that could still result in yet another election.

*The United States for getting us into the current economic mess through unbridled greed and stupid leadership. (Let's hope we see a change with Barack Obama.)

*The people who own Edmonton's daily newspapers because even in boom times both were shadows of their former selves. Let's also send a lump of coal to Conrad Black's jail cell for his part in this debacle.

*Michael Ignatieff for accepting the leadership of the federal Liberal party, even though the members didn't democratically elect him.

*The pundits and pollsters who continually talked about low voter turn out before the provincial and federal elections, and then bemoaned the low voter turn out.

*Kevin Taft, former Alberta Liberal leader and MLA for Edmonton Riverview, for trying to make rodeo Alberta's official sport.

*Elections Alberta for not placing a polling station on the Blood and Piikani reserves for the provincial election. And a big second helping from all the Albertans who had problems voting even when they had a local polling station.

*An auto industry that sacrificed itself in the name of expensive, fragile, and inefficient vehicles, then expected taxpayers to bail them out.

*Prime Minister Stephen Harper, for breaking his own election law, appointing unelected senators, and failing to reach across partisan lines.

*Mayor Stephen Mandel. Traffic to the west end only gets worse.

*The pundits and pollsters who continually talked about how the opposition parties were staging a hostel takeover when they signed a coalition agreement, and then ran polls about people being afraid of a coalition government.

BY THE NUMBERS

A LUMP OF COAL FOR EVERYONE
EXISTING ENERGY GENERATION CAPACITY, BY TYPE
SOURCE: ENERGY ALBERTA

HYDRO • **900 MW**

WIND • **521 MW**

GAS • **4,609 MW**

COAL • **5839 MW**

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PROVINCIAL AFFAIRS · **ENVIRONMENT** · BY KEVIN MA | 413 words

Food For Fuel

ALBERTA ANNOUNCES NEW TARGETS FOR RENEWABLE FUELS — BUT WE'RE NOT AN ENVIRONMENTAL PARADISE JUST YET

Alberta's new biofuel targets are a mixed bag. Crop growers will see higher prices, but so will livestock producers, and using garbage or grease to produce fuel is still just a possibility.

The province recently announced a new renewable fuels standard as part of its provincial energy strategy. The policy requires all fuel sold in the province to contain either five per cent ethanol (for gasoline) or two per cent renewable content (for diesel) by July 2010. The standard does not require the fuels to be produced in Alberta and does not compound with the similar federal renewable fuel standard.

The province estimates this policy could reduce Alberta's annual greenhouse gas emissions by one megatonne a year, a figure that represents 0.43 per cent of Alberta's emissions —the equivalent of removing 260,000 cars from the road.

The policy creates a new market for crops such as canola that farmers can fall back on, says Kevin Auch, president of the Alberta Canola Producers Commission.

It will also help emerging biofuel producers like Canadian Bioenergy, whose 225-million-litre/year biodiesel plant in Sturgeon County is on hold due to financial difficulties. "It will give a huge boost in confidence in people looking to invest in renewable fuel plants," says company president Ian Thomson.

Most of Alberta's ethanol and biodiesel now come from food crops such as corn, wheat, and canola. The province says these fuels use about 1.2 per cent (or about 200,000 tonnes) of Alberta's annual grain and oilseed harvest.

The Canadian Renewable Fuels Association estimates (based on 2007 fuel consumption numbers) that Alberta will need about 285 million litres of ethanol and 138 million litres of biodiesel to meet its renewable fuel targets. It now has about 60 million litres of production capacity.

It's tough to say how much more grain the biofuel sector would need to produce these fuels; future plants might use alternate feedstocks such as grease or garbage as new technologies emerge.

If they don't, and all the fuels are made in Alberta, the biofuel sector would need about 345,000 tonnes of canola and 775,637 tonnes of wheat to make that amount of biofuel — equivalent to about 10 per cent of its annual average harvest for both crops. These numbers are based on feedstock to fuel ratios provided by industry officials.

Alberta will need to do a lot more research to meet the needs of both its biofuel and livestock producers, says Humphrey Banack, president of Wild Rose Agricultural Producers.

"We have to do some serious work on how to use the byproducts," he says, and develop new feed crops that won't compete with biofuels for demand.

LETTERS

STILL PISSED ABOUT NAFTA

I am responding to "Still Duking It Out Over NAFTA," published in *SEE Magazine* on Nov. 27, 2008 [Issue #783].

At the start we are confronted here with a highly controversial reference to so-called North American community defined by NAFTA, the Canada-United States deal, supposedly of great and equal benefit to both mouse and elephant.

It is an unequal relationship between a junior and senior, where it is the senior who always calls the shots. What about the softwood lumber? And what about the oil deal? Under the latter, Canadians may freeze, but the partner south of the border must be supplied with oil.

Even the Third World Mexico, the other NAFTA partner, would not agree to such an atrocity. I fully agree with Elizabeth May, who was born American and therefore lacks Anne McLellan's "colonial mentality," that NAFTA should be renegotiated so as to make Canada and the U.S. genuinely equal partners and defend Canada's national interest.

By the way, U.S. troops have no business operating on Canadian soil under U.S. command, unless Canadian troops are given exactly the same right to operate on American soil under Canadian command. If Harper made this possible, then he has no right to remain Canada's prime minister, because he has betrayed Canada's national interest.

The European Union does not behave in this manner — there is no attempt by the original partners to bully the newcomers.

If I have problems with Anne McLellan's perception of NAFTA, and strongly believe that the controversial Chapter 11 must go, I am even more shocked by her attitude toward the SPP [Security and Prosperity Partnership Agreement]. "I must be a conspiracy theorist," May says, "because the Security and Prosperity Agreement scares the hell out of me."

I agree. It is a patently undemocratic agreement, and it functions by conspiring against Canadian national interests behind the back of Canadians and Parliament as well. The Montebello meeting was an eye-opener. Here the police crassly pretended to be troublemakers so as to disrupt and discredit the peaceful demonstration against the SPP, but alas! Their footwear gave them away.

A subversive, secretive behaviour of this kind on the part of an influential minority, unscrupulously aided by police, has no place in a democracy and it has completely discredited the SPP in Canada.

KAZIMIERA J. COTTAM

GOT SOMETHING TO SAY? SEND YOUR LETTERS TO *SEE* BY E-MAIL (LETTERS@SEE.GREATWEST.CA), POST (*SEE MAGAZINE*, #200,10275 JASPER AVE, EDMONTON, AB, T5J 1X8), OR FAX (432-1102). LETTERS MAY BE EDITED FOR LENGTH AND CLARITY. PREFERENCE IS GIVEN TO LETTERS COMMENTING ON ARTICLES IN *SEE MAGAZINE*.

CORRECTION

SEE Magazine ran a photo of the Arlington Hotel from the City of Edmonton Archives with the story "The Wrecking Ball of Progress Swings Slowly" [SEE #785, Dec. 11].

The photo should have been of the Arlington Apartments.

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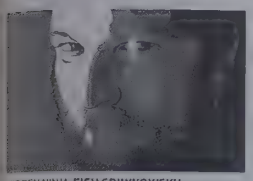
"JUST THINK BACK TO THE GRETZKY TRADE AND HOW EVENTUALLY THE POWERS THAT BE HAD US ALL CHANTING "BUSINESS IS BUSINESS."

TY WHINGE · HOCKEY | 1,112 words

The Oilers Have Become The Bad Guys



HIDDEN NINJA FISH GRIWKOWSKY

WHILE THE TEAM SELLS US NOTHING BUT MEMORIES OF FADED GLORY, THE NEW ARENA DEAL WILL SCREW EVERYBODY OVER

One of the hardest things about growing up is letting go of your imaginary friends. For those of us lucky enough to have been around during the Oilers' heyday, it was impossible not to innocently consider them just the *best* of pals. I still tell the story of how Wayne Gretzky casually greeted my sportswriter dad by name at the airport once, and there are thousands of such anecdotes lingering around the city: how Messier used to eat here and there, what house Fuhr lived in on the edge of Castle Downs, or even at what bars Niinimaa used to bang his head to heavy metal.

We objectified players by conveniently stitching them into our lives in any way possible. Predictably, this often extended from their performance on the ice – their losses were our upsets, their wins a seemingly mandatory part of our city's self-confidence and identity. In the good old days, this wasn't something sold to us: it just happened. We believed the stupendous hype that the Oilers were what put us on the map, that people all over the world heard the word "Edmonton" and thought "winners." A total paradox of self-confident worry, helped along over the years by a team with less and less to show for itself.

Still, marketing and business were always part of the whole Oilers phenomenon. Just think back to the Gretzky trade and how, eventually, the powers that be had us all chanting "business is business." But the sad thing is, looking around calmly and objectively, marketing is all that's really left of the team of yore. In 2008, the modern Oilers are trying to sell us memories we already own, functioning as little more than a cash-grabbing nostalgia machine pumping out as many ballcap variations as possible.

If you want evidence of this, look at the ads all over our streets with an old Oiler from the '80s (still drawing a salary from the team to this day) beside a new Oiler – more imaginary friends. Besides being an ugly comparison on a number of levels of how good we used to have it – the classic jerseys, the wavy haircuts, and the ability to win Stanley Cups being relatively superior – these promos are an accidental admission that the product ain't what it used to be, but, y'know, exists on a bloodline that used to produce staggeringly strong children and therefore deserves patriotic respect or, um, our economy will face the consequences. So, yes, inferior product – but love them or else they'll threaten to leave, once again.

Unfortunately, the smaller anecdotes that come out of the Oil now aren't about the (admittedly league-wide) diluted bloodline's players, but how the organization's paranoid management keeps desperately trying to control its image, the imprisoning of a fan wearing "Fire Lowe" in orange tape at a game, and most recently their abysmal, accusatory treatment of Covered In Oil liveblogger Dave Berry in their press box.

Coveredinoil.blogspot.com is all but abandoned now but, as another of its scribes, Mike Winters, explained in an interview this week, "Watching the way Oilers' ownership works over the community to get what they want has not made me any more of a fan, either. During the lockout the team cried 'poor,' despite being one of the league's best markets, and even pulled out a page from Peter Pocklington's playbook by suggesting that they would move the team if they didn't get what they want. Of course, the lockout cost fans a season of hockey and tarnished the league as a whole, and then the Oilers payroll went up anyway – so I'm not sure how any of it was worth it."

Which brings us to the city's latest crucible, this new arena, being played predictably. I've already written lots on how eventually tax money would eventually be demanded. Despite loud denials, this is the scenario that appears to be materializing. Winters: "Even before the ink was dry on the new labour agreement, Edmonton Investors Group began their PR campaign for a city tax-funded arena, anonymously 'floating' the idea in the pages of the ever-sympathetic *Edmonton Journal*, which was also a part-owner of the team at the time. Before a convincing case was ever made that Rexall was 'old and tired,' people were already talking about where the new building would be and it all kind of snowballed from there.

"Now the City is looking at footing most of the bill for a new rink through taxation and debt – amidst a global economic crisis, mind you – which is kind of unheard of these days. Why is it unheard of? Because tax-funded arenas have proven to be terrible investments for everyone except the team. Despite all of the talk of 'revitalization' and economic benefits, study after study have shown that sports arenas add no new net economic benefit for a city – the money spent is almost always local and discretionary, which means if it's not being spent at a hockey game, it will be spent elsewhere."

Penalty Time | Oiler's captain Ethan Moreau gets a little tripped up earlier this season. FILE PHOTO

It was no surprise when Gary Bettman showed up in town last week saying, "It is imperative that the Oilers have a new building. It is critical both for the future of the Oilers and the city."

What's stunning is that he wasn't more widely ridiculed for the idea that a new building will help anyone but the organization. As one example, you think ticket prices would go *down*? And who pays for the tickets?

But more importantly, Winters continues, "Downtown revitalization is a separate and much more complicated issue, and involves deeper-rooted solutions like increasing population density, adaptive reuse of existing infrastructure, and a proper transit system that reaches the suburbs. An arena that's open three hours a night, especially in the middle of the winter, isn't going to do squat. And if an arena pays for itself, then why isn't the team paying for it? It just isn't worth 20 extra luxury boxes, especially when the City already had a perfectly suitable rink two miles away."

Amazingly, the media and especially fans in duty uniform are now aping the line that the profits from some 2,000-odd extra tickets will benefit us all, ignoring all wider refutations of trickle-down, corporate-welfare Reaganonomics currently sodomizing our entire world. The organization is attempting nothing short of theft. If one just-hiked city tax dollar goes towards the new arena and its surrounding physical and security infrastructure that could've been spent on LRT expansion – or somehow trying to pay for the medical bills of huge wave of aging boomers, never mind just holding the city together – these Oilers have gone from being our imaginary friends to real, flesh-and-blood enemies.

edster's dictionary

LOCAL VOCAB · BY TRENT WILKIE

hockificate

VERB · To take the last name of someone and make it effeminately cute. **"Cogs and Gagsy need to step up, as well as Lubo. If they can all play like Gilbser and Hor... Hor... How do you hockificate Horcoff?"**

kickassify

VERB · To cure something of its capacity to suck. **"I kickassified my anteater and it died within weeks."**

piggyfront

NOUN · The opposite of a piggyback ride. **"I think Robot Steven Mandel and Robot Bill Smith got married shortly after they were seen taking turns giving each other piggyfronts around Fort Edmonton Park."**

spirocheats

NOUN · An intestinal parasite that originated in the area that is now Edmonton after an ice-free corridor opened up at the end of the last Ice Age, known for causing its victims to love beer and contact sports, and to mix two words together to make one. **"I went to my doctor to figure out why I crave liquid bread and incessantly scream 'Oilers!' He told me it was spirocheats and I punched him right in his stupid face!"**

turtleburglar

NOUN · One who pilfers creatures belonging to the order Testudines. **"I thought it was kleptomania at first, but the shells gave it all way. I never wanted to be a turtleburglar; it's just too ridiculous to say aloud."**

check out new vocab every week

DINING · FINE FLAVOURS · BY SCOTT LINGLEY | 641 words

Divine On Whyte

Treat Yourself, For Duck's Sake | Flavours is a taste of heaven in the middle of Whyte Ave. PHOTO BY MERYL SMITH LAWTON

FLAVOURS MODERN BISTRO ON WHYTE IS A GREAT PLACE TO CHARGE YOURSELF SOME HAPPY THIS BOXING WEEK

FLAVOURS MODERN BISTRO
10354 - 82 Ave., 780-439-9604

This time of year, it's easy to forget to do something nice for someone really important – namely, yourself. I'm not talking about the institutionalized hedonism of Christmas, where you eat and drink with reckless abandon in a futile bid to stuff the swirling void of your winter-scarred soul, but a real treat, a gift to your discerning senses.

If you have such an inclination – and a little room left on your credit card after all your Christmas shopping – I'd suggest Flavours Modern Bistro as a possible venue for hopping off the Yuletide Hustle 'n' Bustle Express and basking your tastebuds. The former site of The Bagel Tree retains its exposed brick, hardwood, and tastefully casual ambience, but boasts an extensive, almost perplexing range of fine dining selections. And the wine! Oh, the wine!

My co-diner was so taken aback by the huge and varied list of entrées that she turned first to me and then to the server to help her make up her mind. The server, however, heartily endorsed so many of entrées, she wasn't much help. I had already decided, upon passing the specials board, that I would have the wild mushroom and duck pie ($28), with a glass of Californian Pinot Noir ($11). After changing her mind half a dozen times, Diner #2 decided on the lamb shank in fig compote ($34), with a glass of Argentine malbec ($10). A mixed green salad ($13) would get things rolling.

The platter of organic greens, cucumber, tomato, red onion, and radicchio in a light vinaigrette arrived and proved to be plenty of salad for two to share. It was the perfect dose of delicious roughage to prepare us for the decadent meals to come.

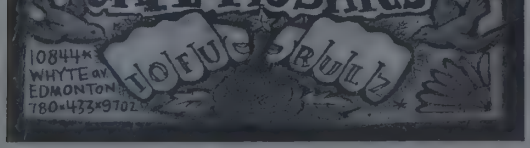
At first my portion of wild mushroom and duck under a golden pasty crust looked a little small, but it was so incredibly rich and savoury I doubt I could have eaten more than what was provided. Ever the duck enthusiast, I was easily wowed by the tender, sapid slips of duck meat mixed with earthy wild mushrooms in a lightly seasoned gravy. The flaky pastry was handy for sopping up every bit. Along with the roasted potato wedges, the array of side vegetables, including the licorice aroma of sautéed fennel, was a perfect complement to the dish. I'm far from a wine expert, but I've had pretty good results pairing a light-bodied, fruity Pinot Noir with duck, and this was no exception.

If the pie was everything I had hoped for, I would have been just as satisfied with the roasted joint of lamb, its distinctively scented meat sliding off the bone, and the subtly sweet counterpoint, fig compote flecked with crispy seeds. The buttery caramelized mashed potatoes underneath were almost a condiment unto themselves.

Luckily for me, my co-diner was incapable of finishing the whole thing so I was able to swoop in and get more than a sampling of her meal. I'd even go so far as to say I'd order it again, but there at least half a dozen other items – biscuit-breaded sable fish, wild mushroom ravioli, goulash, and a few select cuts of beef to name a few – that elicited a Pavlovian response.

By way of a New Year's resolution, I've decreed that I won't wait another year to treat myself to another repast at Flavours and try out their undiscovered culinary gems.

THE TAB: $75 FOR TWO (FOOD ONLY)
THE GIST: A LITTLE PRICY, BUT YOU'RE WORTH IT
TRY: THE LAMB SHANK IN FIG COMPOTE ($34)



IMBIBING · RELIGIOUS RITES | 721 words

Spiritual Spirits

BOOZE MUSE MELISSA PRIESTLEY

IN HONOUR OF THE HOLIDAYS, WE TAKE A BOOZE-THEMED TRIP THROUGH THE WORLD'S HOLY TEXTS

It's that time of year when journalists, wine-oriented and otherwise, dust off their archives of hackneyed holiday topics – most of which involve laundry lists of half-baked gift suggestions. In an effort to diversify the season's offerings, I offer you a holiday booze article with a slightly different slant: the representation of wine and booze in holy texts. Please keep in mind that I'm a wine writer, not a religious scholar, so don't crucify me if you think I've misinterpreted or misrepresented your religion.

Christianity

Big-box retail employees may be required to say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" to prove pseudo-inclusive and secular principles, but we all know Christmas is a Christian holiday. And it's no secret that alcohol, especially wine, is featured dozens of times in the Bible (247, to be precise).

The two best-known examples of Biblical booze are when Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding (John 2:1-11) and when he instructed his followers to drink from a cup of wine at the Last Supper, thereby founding the sacrament of Eucharist (Matthew 26:27, Mark 14:23, and Luke 22:17). These are no small incidents – the first is a straight-up miracle, and the second marked the establishment of an integral part of Christian religious practice and belief.

Yet the Bible also presents several admonitions against drunkenness; Prohibitionist rhetoric would have you believe that alcohol will damn us all. I'm not even going to try to reconcile the two sides; suffice it to say that Jesus liked to booze it up at parties, so as long as you don't become a drunken asstard he shall smile upon thee. And even if you do end up spread-eagled in a puddle of vomit on the bathroom of your staff Christmas party – well, that's what confession is for.

Judaism

Judaism has arguably normalized alcohol consumption more than any other religion. The Torah warns against alcohol abuse, but it also includes wine as a fundamental part of many holidays and religious practices. There is also a strict set of rules (kosher laws) governing the entire process of winemaking.

Practicing Jews are required to have four glasses of wine at Passover, and it is common practice to have a glass of wine every week on the Shabbat (Sabbath). Incidentally, the Shabbat also happens to start on Friday night – proof enough for me that those of the Jewish persuasion are aware of the need to cut loose on the weekend.

Even though Christmas isn't celebrated in Judaism, Hanukkah starts on Dec. 22 and continues for the next eight days – so in the Jewish faith, you get more than a week of kosher wine drinking. Nice.

Islam

Islam is probably the harshest condemner of alcohol in contemporary times. Countries under Islamic law – including Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Sudan – have strict alcohol bans. Violation of this law is punishable by severe penalties, even death. The one big exception is Iran, which has the seventh-largest vineyard acreage despite following Islamic law. Officially recognized, non-Muslim minorities are permitted to make wine for personal use and religious rites, though many Muslims choose to produce wine and deal with the consequences.

Just like the Bible, the Qur'an is paradoxical in that it both condemns and exalts alcohol. Some passages describe booze as "Satan's handiwork" (Sura 5:90), while others state that there are rivers of wine in paradise (Sura 47:15). Scriptural interpretations aside, given the world's current Islamic climate, it's pretty clear that a devout Muslim will be seriously frowned upon for imbibing at any time.

Buddhism

Buddhism has a very practical understanding of alcohol; it is seen as neither good nor evil – any negativity related to alcohol consumption is the result of one's own actions, not the nature of alcohol itself. Nonetheless, Buddha objected to its use because you can't find enlightenment in the bottom of a bottle; alcohol clouds your mind and hinders mental development.

As such, the last of Buddhism's Five Precepts (the rules of good conduct that all Buddhists must follow) is a warning against alcohol and other drugs.

The Precept states that one must "undertake the training to abstain from substances which cause intoxication and heedlessness."

Buddha wasn't into the whole fire and brimstone thing, so it's not like Buddhists will go to hell if they drink booze – but again, it is hard to meditate on a six-pack.

myLook

Andrew Hoekstra | Philosophy student, University of Alberta

BY PAIGE PAQUETTE

My Look: Inspired by Paul Newman, James Dean, and Marlon Brando.
Wearing: My toque is from my Dad. I got my jacket at Value Village, my pants and shoes are from Gravity Pope. The jeans are Tsubi and my shoes are Converse. The shirt's from the APC store in Munich, Germany.

Wanna be in My Look? Send your photo to style@see.greatwest.ca.

RESTO CAPS · RECENTLY REVIEWED · BY SCOTT LINGLEY

ACCENT EUROPEAN LOUNGE
8223-104 St., 780-431-0179
THE TAB: $51 for two (food only)
THE GIST: As ever, a Euro-comfort food landmark
TRY: The steak tartar ($14)
AVOID: Strenuous post-dining activity

COLONEL MUSTARD'S CANTEEN
10802-124 St., 780-488-1590
THE TAB: $41 for two (food only)
THE GIST: Multi-hued sammich joint does gourmet dinner
TRY: Caramelized onion and roasted tomato pizza ($12)

THE COPPER POT
101, 9707-110 St., 780-452-7800
THE TAB: $67 for two (food only)
THE GIST: Fabulous new menu, great view, a casual-fancy night out
TRY: Braised Bison Short Ribs and House Made Duck Sausage ($30)
AVOID: The politicians

EL RANCHO SPANISH RESTAURANT
11810-87 St., 780-471-4930
THE TAB: $33 for two (food only)
THE GIST: solid Mexi-Salvadorean fare, nice room, indifferent service
TRY: The Enchilada Mexicana ($10.95)
BEWARE: Mathematical errors

THE HAT RESTO PUB
10251 Jasper Ave., 780-429-4471
THE TAB: $42.95 for three (food only)
THE GIST: Edmonton greasy-spoon landmark goes upscale
TRY: The burgers!
BEWARE: The sticker shock

MASALAZ
4218-66 St. 780-484-0582
THE TAB: $28 for two (food only)
THE GIST: Affordable, authentic south Indian cuisine, strip-mall ambience
TRY: Masala dossa with sambar ($6.99)
AVOID: The table near the entrance

EVENTS

A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN WALES *RUTHERFORD HOUSE, 11153 SASKATCHEWAN DRIVE, U OF A CAMPUS, DEC 27 - DEC 29* Dylan Thomas' classic Christmas story narrated by Vivien Bosley with music accompaniment by Celtic harpist Gordon Ritchie. Doors at 11 a.m.

ARTS MARKET *THE CARROT COMMUNITY ARTS COFFEEHOUSE, 9351 118TH AVE. DEC 19* Artists and artisans from the community and beyond, sharing unique gifts with local flavour. From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Info: www.thecarrot.ca.

BIG BANG NYE CELEBRATION *EDMONTON EVENT CENTRE, 2556 - 88Z 170TH ST., DEC 31* Doors at 9 p.m.

BLACK RIBBON BALL *HOLIDAY INN, 4520 76TH AVE., DEC 31* Presented by the West Indian Canadian Cultural Association this event addresses the issue of violence within the African/Caribbean community in Edmonton and abroad.

BRIGHT NIGHTS *HAWRELAK PARK, 9330 GROAT RD., DEC 1 - JAN 4* Five hundred Christmas light displays. Drive thru only.

COMMUNITY CHRISTMAS SUPPER *NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE, 11205 101ST ST., DEC 25* Presented by Creating Hope Society of Edmonton. Doors at 3 p.m.

FOOD: TODAY, TOMORROW, TOGETHER – ENSURING HEALTHY LOCAL FOOD FOR ALL ALBERTANS *BARNETT HOUSE, 142ND ST. AND 109TH AVE., DEC 29 - DEC 31* Conference will bring together farmers, producers, processors, policy-makers, activists, academics, and consumers to discuss how we can build a healthy, sustainable, inclusive food system in the province. Info: www.foodalberta.org.

FREE FAMILY ART NIGHTS *NINA HAGGERTY CENTRE, 9704 111TH AVE., OCT 30 - DEC 25* For Parents and children up to 17. Doors at 6:30 p.m. Info: 780-474-7611.

FROM CHAOS TO PEACE MEN'S GROUP *CALLINGWOOD MARKETPLACE, 178TH ST. & 69TH AVE., OCT 30 - DEC 25* Group workshop for men who have experienced abuse from their partner. Sessions facilitated by professional social workers. Every Thu from 6:30-8:30 p.m. Free admission. Info: 780-496-4777.

YESS FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGN *DEC 1 - JAN 16* Youth Emergency Shelter kicks off its annual fundraising campaign. Info: www.yess.org.

QUEER

AGAPE *EDUCATION FACULTY, U OF A CAMPUS* Focus group on sex and gender differences in education and culture. Pre-service and practicing teachers, community members welcome. Info: andre.grace@ualberta.ca or 780-492-0772.

EPS/LGBTQ LIASION COMMITTEE The EPS/LGBTQ Liaison Committee is composed of a variety of concerned lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer, allied community members, and police officers. Email questions or concerns to epslgbtq@yahoo.ca. All inquiries treated with confidentiality and respect. To report a hate or bias motivated crime, contact the EPS Hate & Bias Crime Unit, 780-421-3489.

INSIDE/OUT U of A Campus-based organization for LGBTQ faculty, graduates, academic & staff. Straight allies welcome. Monthly meetings. Info: kwells@ualberta.ca or mwonham@ualberta.ca

PRIDE CENTRE *9540 111 AVE., 780- 488-3234.* Hours: TUE–FRI 1-10 p.m., SAT 12-6:30 p.m. Drop-in, library, and community internet services are available. Online enewsletter Hours: TUE–FRI 1-10 p.m., SAT 12-6:30 p.m. Info: 780-488-3234 or www.pridecentreofedmonton.org.

TEAM EDMONTON A volunteer operated, non-profit society for members and friends of the GLBT community offering well organized and fun sporting events and other recreational activities within a positive social framework. Info: www.teamedmonton.ca.

WOMONSPACE Non-profit lesbian organization for Edmonton and surrounding area. Organized monthly activities. Memberships available, including monthly newsletter. Confidentiality assured. Info: www.womonspace.ca, womonspace@gmail.com, or 780-482-1794.

YOUTHSPACE *PRIDE CENTRE OF EDMONTON, 9540-111 AVE.* An after-school drop-in program for gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-identified, queer, questioning, and allied (GLBTQQ&A) youth under 25. Open TUE-SAT 3-7 p.m. Info: brendan@pridecentreofedmonton.org or 780-488-3234.

FEATURING daily lunch & dinner buffet
HAPPY HOURS daily 4-6pm EXOTIC INDIAN HOT HORS D'OEUVRES

EXCLUSIVE wine + beer menu
take out menu available TO COMPLIMENT OUR FINE FOOD

"IT'S LIKE ONE OF THE BEST EIGHT-PIECE BANDS YOU'LL EVER SEE.

MUSIC PREVIEW · CRAFT TIME! · BY TRENT WILKIE | 614 words

A Carol By Any Other Name Would Smell As Sweet

OR: HOW EDMONTON'S ANNUAL *CHRISTMAS CAROL PROJECT* MAKES MY GRADE 3 CHRISTMAS PROJECT LOOK REALLY, REALLY SILLY

THE CHRISTMAS CAROL PROJECT
Featuring Bill Bourne as Ebenezer Scrooge, Maria Dunn as Tiny Tim, and Tom Roschkov as Bob Cratchit. Winspear Centre (#4 Churchill Square). Dec. 27 (8pm). Tickets: $27-$32, available at the Winspear box office (428-1414).

Tiny Tim Lives! | "God bless us, every one," So says Maria Dunn. PHOTO BY DAVID WILLIAMSON

There are many differences between *The Christmas Carol Project* and my Grade 3 Christmas project. For example, mine was to write a carol based on a nativity scene that I made. The scene was made out of GI Joes covered with fake blood; my carol described the carnage very well as I sang it with sound effects. My Grade 3 teacher was deeply offended and made me redo the entire project. I barely passed on the second try.

This *Christmas Carol Project*, thankfully, is nothing like mine. This *Carol* is a professional ensemble of the highest quality, and in 2007 it won the Alberta Film and Television Awards' "Rosie" for Best Musical or Variety Special. It has been aired on a variety of television stations and is still gets trotted out every year on Access TV. Also, It was twice been a critics' picked by the *Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* as a must-see Christmas special.

My Christmas carol project got me a stern lecture and a lifetime of animosity towards GI Joes. As you can see, they are two completely different ideas. With that in mind, how was the better of the two ideas conceived?

"I was in the Grant MacEwan Arts Administration program and realized what a great number of wonderful musicians there were in Edmonton," recalls producer and originator John Armstrong. "I thought it would be great to showcase them all in one production. I was watching the old Alistair Sim version of *A Christmas Carol* and thought there was the vehicle. There were so many great character parts in it. There are not many stories that have that many characters with such prevalent roles in the story. I sat on it for a while until I started discussing it with my buddy Tom Roschkov, who I've played with in a number of bands over the years, and he said that it was a great idea and that we should do it. So he got talked into being Bob Cratchit."

This year for the first time the *Project* will be held at Winspear Centre, where the audience will be treated to not only the aural splendor of the event, but a few ocular treats as well. "Visually we keep it fairly simple," Armstrong said. "There are costumes and we are going to have the band set up on some nice risers so there will be a bit of height. We also have a new light guy working with us this year. So we are going to see what we can get away with in the Winspear. I think it's a little more attuned to lighting up the symphony as opposed to a theatrical kind of thing. The best thing about the Winspear is that this will be the best-sounding *Christmas Carol Project*."

Unlike my project, this *Carol* doesn't begin with my version of the baby Jesus loading his shotgun.

"We start the show with a song circle by the singer/songwriters in the band and they change that up every year," Armstrong explains. "They'll generally feature a song off their new release in the song circle. Maria Dunn has an amazing new album out, as does Kevin Cook. That's actually around the same time that a couple of our cast members have a competition for the gaudiest Hawaiian shirt.

"We have people who claim they come back every single year," Armstrong continues. "I thought I was the only one to see it every time. There certainly are people who consider it to be part of their Christmas tradition now here in Edmonton. It's like one of the best eight-piece bands you'll ever see."

Boxing Day Soundclash | Team Building joins Ben Spencer's Funeral and Thea vs. Loki for some post-Christmas debauchery this Friday at The Pawn Shop. PHOTO BY ANDREW PAUL

HOT TICKETS · MUST-SEE SHOWS

SOLIDARITY
Team Building
Pawn Shop · Dec. 26
$10 | At the door

In February their debut EP *Upon St. Lawrence* reached number one on CJSR's charts, thanks in part to their massive local following that eats up TB's space-rock melodies like a chubby kid in a marshmallow factory. Their sound has been compared to Radiohead and Mogwai — credit for that goes to frontman Brad Amundson, who you may or may not remember from his days with now-defunct Edmonton punk export Choke. Also joining this week's exercise is Thea vs. Loki and Ben Spencer's Funeral.

LIGHTNING FAST
Thunderheist
Starlite Room · Dec. 26
$20 | Ticketmaster

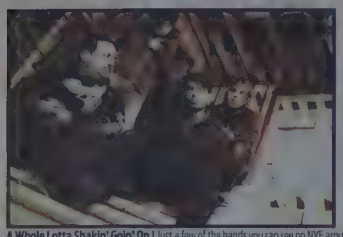
This Toronto pair of electro-pop propagators want nothing more than for you to shake your hot rump all over the dance floor. This will require little effort on your part considering the hybrid nature of their beats. Nigerian-born MC Isis will whip you into motion over the funky rhythms courtesy of Grahm Zilla — a self-identified vinyl junkie with no morals when it comes to "Asian chicks with bangs" — mixing everything from electro-jazz to rock 'n' roll. So if you find yourself hanging out on Jasper, stop by and shake that ass.

OMFG, LMAO
MSTRKRFT
Edmonton Event Centre · Dec. 27
$42.00 | Ticketmaster

All these guys do is party. Their song "Bounce" featuring NORE told us so. The only thing they like doing more than partying is sitting around the kitchen table in wool sweaters and making up fancy words with no vowels in them. Actually, we can't confirm that. What we *can* confirm, though, is that this Toronto duo has a deep affection for moustaches and remixing huge cross-sections of the top 40 pop canon — Wolfmother, Usher, John Legend, and Kylie Minogue, just to name a few.

MUSIC PREVIEW · EENIE MEENIE MINEY MO · BY KATHLEEN BELL | 1,021 words

Burning Down The House Of '08



A Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On | Just a few of the bands you can see on NYE around town, clockwise from bottom left Tupelo Honey, The Trews, Hank & Lily, Les Tabernacles, and The Wheat Pool. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

OUR PICKS FOR THE BEST NEW YEAR'S EVE SHOWS IN THE CITY, AND THE RESOLUTIONS THESE BANDS ARE PLANNING TO BREAK COME MIDNIGHT

My only resolution this year is to rock as hard as I can, as much as I can. And unlike the decision to quit drinking or stop smoking, there is no better place to get started on my little pledge to myself than at one or more or all of this year's New Year's Eve extravaganzas. So I say give up the torturous task of coming up with something you don't want to do and join me in the only resolution you know you'll be able to fully commit yourself to in 2009: rock 'n' roll.

In order to get you started, we've compiled a list of the sweetest shindigs around town. Along the way we also asked some of the bands to divulge the promises they've made to themselves for the New Year — resolutions they will struggle with all year while we can revel in our own assured success. Go us!

(1) You can see **Les Tabernacles**' Liam Harvey Oswald take his last puff at the **Pawn Shop** alongside **Whitey Houston** and **Coffin Ships**.

"My resolution this year is to quit smoking cigarettes," Oswald says. "My resolution *last* year was to quit smoking cigarettes. If I don't manage to quit smoking cigarettes this year, I will no longer take part in the tradition because I like to smoke cigarettes ... or I died of lung cancer."

Maybe it's just me, but he doesn't sound like he's 100 per cent behind that one, but I'm sure he'll be 100 per cent behind the show on New Year's Eve. It'll be a smokin' (in a non-cigarette kinda way) good time. Whitey, of Whitey Houston, is also nixing the cigs. He's fairly confident about that one, since he doesn't smoke. Tickets are at The Pawn Shop, BlackByrd, Freecloud, and Listen.

(2) Speaking of confident, I'm thinking **The Trews** and **Big Sugar** at the **Shaw Conference Centre**, will be, and I'm not using the word lightly, *awesome*. Apparently The Trews will literally be sharing the stage with a reunited Big Sugar (well, strictly speaking, it's really just Gordie Johnson and Mr. Chill). I can't wait to see a *Guitar Hero*-esque rock battle between Trews guitarist John-Angus MacDonald and Johnson. If I were a bettin' gal, I'd put my money on the speakers exploding. Tickets at Ticketmaster.

(3) Cecil the Weasel from **The Hank and Lily Show**, a vaudeville-based experimental indie act you can catch at the **ARTery** on the 31st, would like to address the idea of the resolution.

"The mindless sacks of flesh who make these 'resolutions' are rarely able to commit to them and thereby are undermining the meaning of the word," he writes via e-mail. "I would feel more comfortable if we were to call them 'attempted life adjustments.' But even this makes me squirm in borrowed skin a little." Did I mention they're kind of kooky? Cecil's attempted life adjustment is to start smoking.

Lily, on the other hand, is shooting for the stars with her resolution. "Stop stealing babies ('cuz Hank says it's wrong, so I guess he is right)." Good luck with that. Hank and Lily will have support in their endeavours from **GhostKeeper**, **The Sunset 6** and **The Secretaries**, who plan to "get sponsored by a tequila manufacturer for a European tour, and then by an opium manufacturer for a tour of Hades." Help them achieve these lofty goals by attending this cabaret-themed whirligig into the New Year. Tickets at Blackbyrd and Megatunes.

(4) If you really want to dive right into our "attempted life adjustment" of nonstop rock, **The Starlite Room** is the place to go. While **Brixx** (formerly known as Velvet Underground) and The Starlite Room will share the likes of **The Mad Bomber Society**, **Raygun Cowboys**, **Let's Dance**, **Ill-fit Outfit**, **Red Ram**, **Instant Pink**, and **The Michael James Band**, **The Temple** will have DJs spinning for your constant entertainment. You're going to need to hydrate and caffeinate for this one. Tickets at Blackbyrd, Freecloud, Listen, and Foosh.

(5) If you want to pace yourself a little, catch **The Wheat Pool** playing the **Black Dog Freehouse**. An intimate venue filled with some real Canadian spirit seems like a perfect way to greet the New Year. Friends, beer, country-rock ... that's what I call starting off on the right foot. Grab your tickets from the Dog itself.

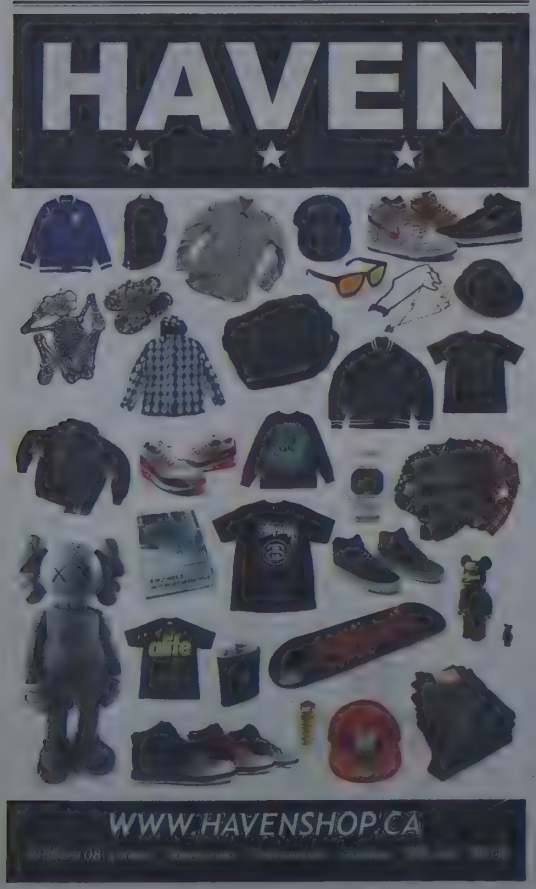
(6) **Tupelo Honey**, with **Murder City Sparrows**, will be holding down the **Urban Lounge** on the Eve. And while they are sure to bust out those soaring rock anthems, they are far more realistic about their future goals.

"We all try to make New Year's resolutions but they are always really lame," says Tupelo Honey guitarist Dan Davidson. "Individually we all make the classic 'get into shape,' 'read more' type of resolutions. It seems that people figure out what they really want to change about themselves as the year goes on. As a band we just wanna work on writing way more often, and being nicer to our van. We should probably clean that thing – I'm pretty sure there's something growing on the back seat that now has teeth and hair." Seek out Ticketmaster or the Urban Lounge for tickets.

(7) How about resolving to "give up the grudge" with **Gob** at **Jet Nightclub**? Sweat off the toxic buildup from 2008 while singing along to some punchy punk. Everybody! "I may be a loser, but at least I'm not alone!" That song is so cathartic. Tix at Ticketmaster.

(8) Last, but certainly not least, is the sweet-ton of non-alcoholic happenings in and around **Sir Winston Churchill Square**. We got **Kevin Flesher**, **Five on the Side**, **Colleen Rae & Cornerstone** and **Soul-jah Fyah** outside. Inside at Stanley A. Milner Library, you can catch **Marco Claveria** and **Back Porch Swing**. CBC's putting on a show at their Centre Stage with **Kat Danser**, **The Polyrhythm Excitement Club with the Vibe Tribe Dancers**, and **Christian Hansen and The Autistics**. Not to mention the face-painting, ice-skating, crafting, balloon artists, and wagon rides. Oh, and fireworks! Don't forget the fireworks! Back off, kiddies, I'm first! No ticket necessary, just show up ready to have a good time.

Have fun, everybody, and here's to a musical 2009!! See you at the show....



CD REVIEWS

Pop

FALL OUT BOY

Folie à Deux

(Island)

★★★★½

Only one band has ever put out an album with guest spots from Pharrell, Elvis Costello, Lil Wayne, and Debbie Harry. That band is Fall Out Boy, and that album is the superb *Folie à Deux*.

To be a Fall Out Boy fan is to constantly be arguing your way out from a corner, so here's my argument: you're entitled to hate lyricist/bassist/de facto frontman Pete Wentz. He writes awful lyrics and pulsates a manicured self-loathing.

Vocalist/guitarist/songwriter Patrick Stump, on the other hand, while largely anonymous in his own band, is in the very highest category of pop craftsman. He's the one who wrote the searing guitar stomp of "I Don't Care," he's the one who arranged the glitzy showtune horns and handclaps on "20 Dollar Nose Bleed," and he's the one who sings the tidal wave falsetto hooks — not to mention all of his own backups — on "The (Shipped) Gold Standard." Stump's melodies are criminally catchy, and he crams them into every available nook and cranny. These are songs with singalong verses, let alone choruses. So c'mon: admit you've been seduced by Fall Out Boy. You're in good company — did I mention their last album featured Jay-Z?

MICHAEL HINGSTON

Blues

JOSH RAGER

Time and Again

(Effendi)

★★★☆☆

Josh Rager is one of the new breed of Quebec musicians offering up a sweet, smoky, fast-paced brand of fusion and uptempo jazz. The pianist's latest disc, *Time and Again*, is both new and traditional — the opening, "Side Eye," is a wild, driving jam featuring Frank Lozano's tenor sax and Al McLean's alto sax trading leads before giving way to Fraser Hollins' bass riffs, closing with Rager's frenetic piano. "I'm Old Fashioned" cools the beat with a more traditional instrumental riff with '50s overtones. It's the perfect lead into "Indian Summer," the bouncing horns and piano evoking images of unseasonable warmth and colourful autumn palettes. Rager slows down for the title tune, a misty, romantic number that evokes candlelit dinners and rekindled love and loss. While piano and sax feature big, Hollins adds a tinge of sadness with a teary bass solo. Only a single number features vocals, with Johnny Scott adding his dulcet tenor tones to the love ballad "Never Let Me Go."

PAUL MARCK

Hip hop

CLIPSE

Road to Till the Casket Drops

(Re-Up)

★★★★☆

After *Hell Hath No Fury*'s dismal sales and the Clipse's well-documented label woes, it's nice to see that rap's most talented duo, Push T and Malice, haven't given up. Their latest mixtape, the prelude to the forthcoming *Till the Casket Drops* full-length, is the only place you'll hear crack raps effortlessly delivered alongside Shakespeare references. Wordplay and clever similes come naturally to the Thornton brothers and when they're spitting over carefully chosen production from current rap songs they put the originals to shame. In a mere 15 seconds of "Intro" they reference ancient Rome, the Bible, John McCain, David Blaine, and pushing coke. Over T.I.'s "Swagger Like Us," they justify the critical reverence for their lyrics, and on "Big Dreams" you believe them when they slip in the brag about being "the best duo ever." Though this mixtape is just over a half hour, the anticipation it builds for the full-length makes the road to *Till the Casket Drops* a long one.

MIKE DEANE

Rock

THE DECEMBERISTS

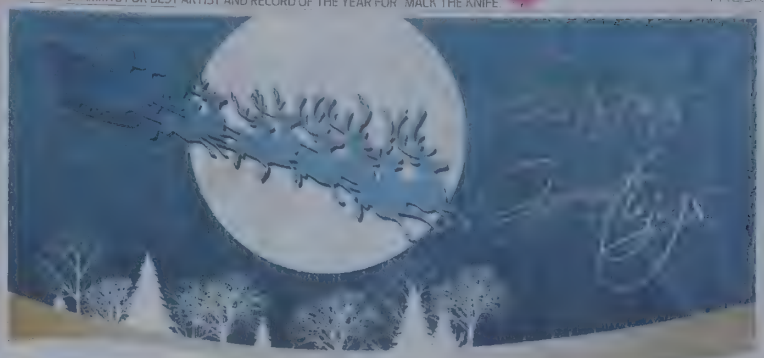
Always the Bridesmaid

(Capitol)

★★★★☆

To cleanse their palates for their forthcoming rock opera *The Hazards of Love*, Portland's The Decemberists have released three internet-only singles grouped under the loose banner *Always the Bridesmaid*. And if these terrific songs are indeed Colin Meloy's leftovers, we're in for a real treat come March. They begin in top gear with "Valerie Plame," a jubilant tuba-and-ukulele barnburner celebrating the betrayed CIA agent, seen from the perspective of the people she was infiltrating as they see her picture flash across the news. The songs are all strong, showing off Meloy's literary prowess and bursting with simple melodies — the only real misstep is an overly cutesy cover of The Velvet Underground's "I'm Sticking With You." Best of all, though, is "Raincoat Song," Over a sparsely plucked acoustic guitar, Meloy sings the loveliest and saddest chorus I can think of in recent memory: "The raincoat that you wore / when it rained today / I think it only made it rain more." The hazards of love, indeed.

MICHAEL HINGSTON

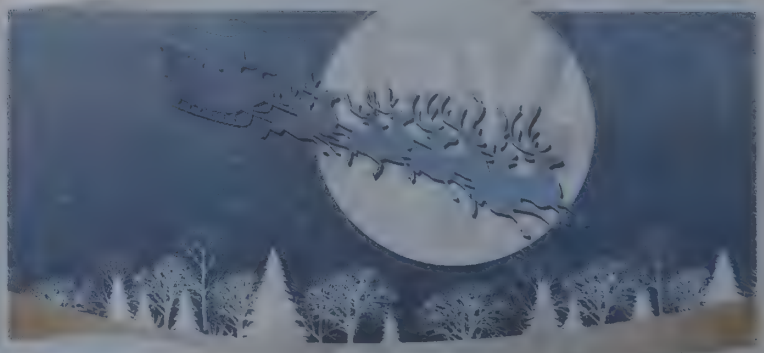


SHERLOCK HOLMES PUBS®
West Edmonton Mall
Christmas Eve - Closed at 8pm
Christmas Day - Closed
Boxing Day - Regular Hours
KISS THE COD NEW YEARS EVE!!!
New Year's Day (Jan 1) - Closed

The SHERLOCK HOLMES Pubs

SHERLOCKS HOLMES PUBS®
Downtown
Christmas Eve - Closed at 3pm
Christmas Day - Closed
Boxing Day - Regular Hours
New Year's Day (Jan 1) - Closed

SHERLOCK HOLMES PUB®
Capilano Mall
Christmas Eve - Closed at 7pm
Christmas - Day Closed
Boxing Day - Regular Hours
TOGA - ARTY NEW YEARS EVE!!
New Year's Day (Jan 1) - Closed



Seasons Greetings

THE ROSE AND CROWN PUB

THE ROSE & CROWN PUB®
Christmas Eve - Closed at 7pm
Christmas Day - Closed
Boxing Day - Closed
December 27 - Closed
December 28 - Closed
EAST INDIAN NEW YEARS EVE!!!
New Year's Day (Jan 1) - Closed

DEVANEY'S irish pub

DEVANEY'S IRISH PUB®
Christmas Eve - Closed at 7pm
Christmas Day - Closed
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MUSIC PREVIEW · **MAD MAD WORLD** · BY FAWNDA MITHRUSH | 791 words

Shake Your Kibbutz

ISRAEL'S MONOTONIX PROVE THAT A LIVE ROCK SHOW IS SOMETHING YOU SHOULD NEVER TAKE FOR GRANTED

MONOTONIX
w/ Desiderata & Mad Cowboys. The Pawn Shop (10551-82 Ave). Dec 27 (9pm). Tickets: $14, available at Ticketmaster (451-8000/ticketmaster.ca), Blackbyrd Myoozik.

Monkey See, Monkey Do | If the show fits, you should probably eat it. Makes a helluva rock show. PHOTO SUPPLIED

It's the day after Boxing Day, you've unwrapped your new iPhone and are buzzing to download a whack of new music. Before you hop on the comp and spend hours avoiding any real social contact, however, ask yourself one question. What was the last time you got out of the house, walked through the colder-than-a-witch's-you-know-what conditions beyond the couch, and took a chance on a live show? Now, you may have never heard of Tel Aviv's Monotonix, but these guys are definitely onto something with their absolutely insane brand of rock show.

Hailing from a country that banned them from most venues due to their raucous antics – including but not limited to setting up and playing their set smack in the middle of the floor, disrobing and playing in short shorts, lighting their drums and/or the lead singer's pants on fire, leading the crowd Pied Piper-style around outside the venue to close the show (we doubt this will happen in minus-40 windchill, but you never know) – the idea of the live *show* is something that the men of Monotonix take pretty darn seriously.

"Right now, with the whole thing with computers and YouTube, everybody can watch anything they want – you can download any kind of music that you want," explains frontman Ami Shalev from a rare at-home moment in Israel (Monotonix plays upwards of 200 shows a year). "I think that's a good thing. But there's no substitute for real good live show: It's the vibe, it's the smell, it's everything.

"That's why live shows are very important, and they're most important in this time when you can get any kind of music you want from the Internet. It's people gathering together for one purpose, just to see and to have fun and socialize. We try to play our live shows uniquely – we want to give people an experience that they wouldn't get anywhere else."

So what is it that makes these guys different than other wild live bands? Shalev thinks it's the Israeli vibe – even though most popular music in Israel tends to have its roots in Greek and Arabic traditions, Monotonix takes inspiration from their own culture's tense undercurrents.

"People are pretty wild in the way that they think about things," he says. "The people here are not very polite, and there's not a lot of political correctness. They speak very loudly, and if they're standing in line for a movie or show, well, there's no line. But it's fun. It's very relaxed, but it tense on the other side. Our music is kind of a mix between the fact that we are alive here in Israel – the way that we live, the way that people behave, the way that people stand in lines, the way people drive, they way they do anything."

From the looks of those YouTube videos and live shots – flaming cymbals, shirtless hairy chests – I though I'd ask Shalev if I should bring a helmet to The Pawn Shop this Saturday. "Nah, the show is not violent," he laughs. "It's only about fun. We know how to do it so people won't get hurt. We don't do any damage to the venue. People dance and jump, but they don't get violent. We almost never get a bad reaction to the show – people are very positive about it."

NYE09
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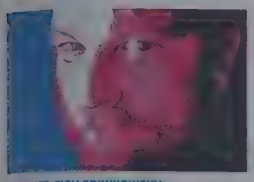


WILDLIFE FISH GRIWKOWSKY

THE HYDEAWAY HAD DEEP-FREEZE ISSUES, BUT SOME NEW DEVELOPMENTS ON THE LOCAL FRONT MADE US FEEL WARMER LAST WEEK

There are various defining moments for rock 'n' roll bands – who can forgive **Soul Asylum** for fleeing the stage just because a pitcher hit their singer in the head long ago at Dinwoodie, for example? Weak. **Cheap Trick** also vamoosed from a Halloween party at the Convention Centre, just because their electric guitar chords became mysteriously soaked in beer. A moment of sublime tragedy for all.

Still, cross the line into human waste and things become a little bit less black and white. This weekend now passed, the *Here & Noun* issue #2 release party was splintered because, as **Field+Stream** singer Smokey puts it, "A water main burst spewing shit and piss all over The Hydeaway." While the magazine party simply moved to New City, the band's plans to have their Christmas carol concert filmed in an intimate setting required someplace softer. So on Sunday night, while many of you were properly sleeping under layers of downy blankets, a number of our city's musical luminaries rewrote the book of Bing Crosby.

Staring with an agonizingly beautiful "Little Drummer Boy," the gnome-capped musicians played to overhead-lyrics light at the **Birch Heart Christmas party**. Filmmaker **Steven Hope** captured their souls with dual sorcerer's eyes as many of Edmonton's prettiest girls and boys sat pleasantly on the floor so as not to block his efforts. Word is, a DVD will come of this, and I especially hope he got the part where **Natalie Danchuk** stuck her bum in everyone's faces, trying to get a photo of **Paul Arnusch**'s big toe sticking out of his sock. We now darn well know what to get *someone* for Christmas.

The answer is one new sock.

Those was touching. **Gavin Dunn** sucking back as much whiskey as possible as **Smokey** massaged the true meaning of Christmas out into the basement stage: terrible, terrible sadness and suicidal loneliness. As mid-'80s Japanese advertisements used to say, "These are the feelings."

Every December we overload our heads with a mashup of the distant and recent past – the sometimes pleasant happenings of the last year hit head-on with the ugly reality of your family getting older, more confused, sickly, and demanding. In order to prepare for the inevitable march of banal questions approaching you on the horizon like an army of ants, I find it's helpful to prepare a list of what you did all year, which you can just hand to people instead of having to talk to them. Pretending to have a stomach ache helps too.

Back to music news: you'll be glad to hear **Paul James Coutts** has been working on a new band with **Tom Murray**. Lots of the same songs he did with such bands as Calgary's XL_Birdsuit and the evaporated rock powerhouse Twin Fangs, but this time with a [illegible] The work is [illegible] to video sharing [illegible] it, nah. [illegible] job [illegible] the listening [illegible] but it's [illegible] pity, any [illegible] just say it's not Chase Vs Cashless [illegible] a [illegible]

Meanwhile, **Penny Buckner**, the other half of Twin Fangs, is working with **Bobby Kydd** on a new side project outside of Headband. You will like it.

Next week, we'll be wrapping up the year's events from a local perspective (sorry, Beyoncé fans), so meanwhile just a reminder that **The ARTery** is also having a kickass New Year's Eve party featuring **Hank + Lily**, **The Secretaries**, **Sunset IV**, **Ghostkeeper**, and DJ **Miss Mannered**. The venue was a huge part of why 2008 was so awesome around these parts, so it's kind of fitting the most wonderful and weird show of the season will be there. Tickets are $25 and include the chance to hang out with *Bob the Angry Flower* cartoonist **Steve Notley** in person (if you're lucky).

LIVE MUSIC

THURSDAY

DJs/Club Nights

I LOVE 80S *NEW CITY, 10081 JASPER AVE.* Dexter Nebula and Anarchy Adam. Every Thur.

Jazz

DUELING PIANO SHOWS *THE IVORY CLUB, 2940 CALGARY TR.* Dueling piano shows every Thu 8 p.m., Fri & Sat 9 p.m.

FRIDAY

Jazz

DUELING PIANO SHOWS *THE IVORY CLUB, 2940 CALGARY TR.* Dueling piano shows every Thu 8 p.m., Fri & Sat 9 p.m.

Pop & Rock

BOXING DAY BASH *THE PAWN SHOP, 2ND FLOOR, 10551 82ND AVE.* With Team Building, Thea vs. Loki and Ben Spencer's Funeral. Doors at 9 p.m.
CRUSH *YELLOWHEAD CASINO, 12464 153RD ST.*
DB BUXTON REVUE *NEW CITY 10081 JASPER AVE.* With The Swamp Sex Robots. Doors at 8 p.m.
NAUGHTY DIVA *URBAN LOUNGE, 10544 WHYTE AVE.*

SATURDAY

Alternative

CORVID LORAX *THE ARTERY, 9535 JASPER AVE.* With Swamp Sex Robots, the Sunset 6, the Zardozians, and Yo Yo Pa. Film Projections and installations by Chris Payne. Doors at 9 p.m.

Blues & Roots

BLUES ON WHYTE *BLUES ON WHYTE, 10329 WHYTE AVE.* Afternoon Jam, 4-8:30 p.m. Info: www.bluesonwhyte.ca.

Concerts

CHRISTMAS CAROL PROJECT *FRANCIS WINSPEAR CENTRE, 9720 102ND AVE.* Doors at 8 p.m.

DJs/Club Nights

OH SNAP! *THE TEMPLE, 10030 102ND ST.* Degree & All Out DJs.
STEVE AOKIE *EDMONTON EVENT CENTRE, 2556 - 882 170TH ST.* With MSTRKRFT. Doors at 9 p.m.

Jazz

DUELING PIANO SHOWS *THE IVORY CLUB, 2940 CALGARY TR.* Dueling piano shows every Thu 8 p.m., Fri & Sat 9 p.m.

Pop & Rock

COLOR IN CONFLICT *THE STARLITE ROOM, 10030 102ND ST.* With Desousa Drive and JFR Project. Doors at 9 p.m.
CRUSH *YELLOWHEAD CASINO, 12464 153RD ST.*
MONOTONIX *THE PAWN SHOP, 2ND FLOOR, 10551 82ND AVE.* With Madcowboys and Desiderata. Doors at 8 p.m.
ROCKET SAUCE *URBAN LOUNGE, 10544 WHYTE AVE.*
STATE OF SHOCK *JET NIGHTCLUB & SPORTS LOUNGE, 9221 34TH AVE.* With Soul Side In

SUNDAY

Alternative

CELTIC MUSIC SESSION *DEVANEY'S IRISH PUB, 9013 88TH AVE.* Hosted by Keri-Lynne Zwicker from 4-7 p.m.

Blues & Roots

NEWCASTLE PUB & GRILL ACOUSTIC OPEN STAGE *NEWCASTLE PUB AND GRILL, 6108 90TH AVE.* Hosted by Willy James & Crawdad. Doors at 3 p.m.
ONCE JUST *BLUES ON WHYTE, 10329 WHYTE AVE.*

Concerts

OPUS 29 *MUTTART HALL, ALBERTA COLLEGE, 10050 MACDONALD DR.* Doors at 7 p.m.

Pop & Rock

JONNY MCCORMACK *NEW CITY, 10081 JASPER AVE.* With Brad Shigeta, Bill Richards, Matthew Roberts and Gord Graber. Doors at 9 p.m.

MONDAY

DJs/Club Nights

METAL MONDAYS *NEW CITY, 10081 JASPER AVE.* Likwid Lounge.

TUESDAY

Blues & Roots

SIMON BENNETT AND WAYNE ALLCHIN *LB'S PUB, #110, 23 AKINS DR. ST. ALBERT* Doors at 9 p.m.

Pop & Rock

MEGAN CALLAN *BRIXX BAR & GRILL, 10030 102ND ST.* Doors at 9 p.m.

WEDNESDAY

Blues & Roots

BLUEGRASS JAM *PLEASANTVIEW COMMUNITY HALL, 10860 57TH AVE.* Hosted by the Northern Bluegrass Circle Music Society. 7:30 p.m.
JACK SEMPLE BAND & GEORGE BLONDHEIM *HAVEN SOCIAL CLUB, 15120 A STONY PLAIN RD.* With Comedian Tim Kosla. Hosted by "Jungle" Jim Jerome. Doors at 6 p.m.
MISTER LUCKY *BELL AND COURT, 10A MAIN BLVD. SHERWOOD PARK.*

Concerts

MUSIC WEDNESDAYS AT NOON *MCDOUGALL UNITED CHURCH, 10025 101ST ST.* 12:10-12:50 pm. Free admission, bring a bag lunch. Tea and coffee available. Info: 468-4964.

Pop & Rock

BLUE JAY *NEW CITY 10081 JASPER AVE.* With Greg Gory.
CHUCK BROWN *SHERLOCK HOLMES PUB CAPILANO*
THE DERINA HARVEY BAND *ATLANTIC TRAP AND GILL, 7704 104TH ST.* Info: 780-432-4611
DUANE ALLEN *SHERLOCK HOLMES PUB DOWNTOWN, 10012 101A AVE.*
GOB *JET NIGHTCLUB & SPORTS LOUNGE, 9221 34TH AVE.* With Greater Than Giants & Hollywood Assassyn
THE HANK PINE AND LILY FAWN SHOW *THE ARTERY, 9535 JASPER AVE.* With The Secretaries, and Ghostkeeper. Doors at 8 p.m.
LES TABERNACLES *THE PAWN SHOP, 2ND FLOOR, 10551 82ND AVE.* With Whitey Houston and Coffin Ships. Doors at 8:30 p.m.
LYLE HOBBS *DEVANEY'S IRISH PUB, 9013 88TH AVE.*
NYE 2008 *THE STARLITE ROOM, 10030 102ND ST.* With Mad Bomber Society, Raygun Cowboys, Let's Dance, Illit Outfit, Red Ram, Instant Pink & Micheal James Band. Doors at 7 p.m.
SOULED OUT *YELLOWHEAD CASINO, 12464 153RD ST.*
V.I.P. *CASINO EDMONTON, 7055 ARGYLL RD.*

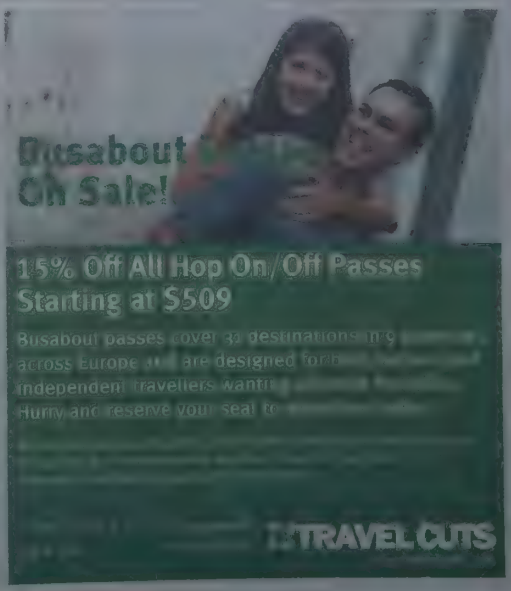
ONGOING

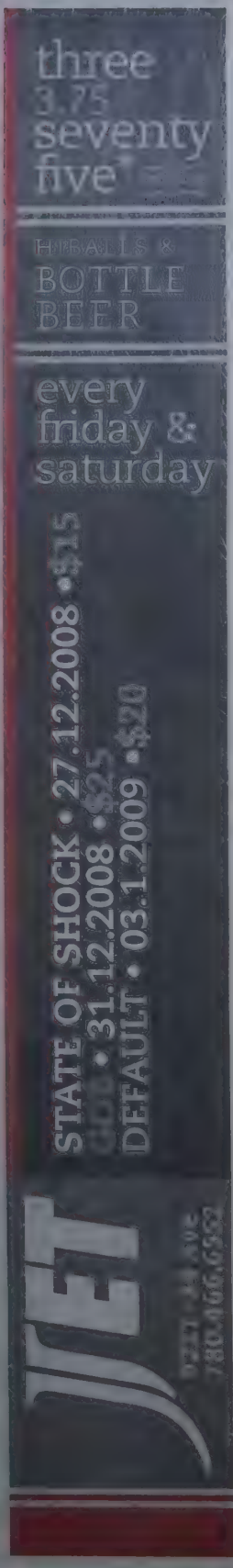
Blues & Roots

FUNKAFEELIA *BLUES ON WHYTE, 10329 WHYTE AVE. DEC 29 - DEC 30*
JORDAN COOK *BLUES ON WHYTE, 10329 WHYTE AVE. DEC 31 - JAN 3* New Years Eve show
TIM WILLIAMS *BLUES ON WHYTE, 10329 WHYTE AVE. DEC 26 - DEC 27*

Pop & Rock

BOBBY AUSTIN *SHERLOCK HOLMES PUB WEM, WEST EDMONTON MALL DEC 26 - DEC 27*
COLLEEN RAE & CORNERSTONE *CASINO EDMONTON, 7055 ARGYLL RD. DEC 26 - DEC 27*
THE DERINA HARVEY BAND *ATLANTIC TRAP AND GILL, 7704 104TH ST. DEC 26 - DEC 27* Info: 780-432-4611
JIMMY WHIFFEN *SHERLOCK HOLMES PUB WEM, WEST EDMONTON MALL EC 29 - DEC 31*





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"TO STEAL A METAPHOR FROM *MAD MEN*, *BENJAMIN BUTTON* IS **A GOLD VIOLIN**: IT'S BEAUTIFUL, BUT IT DOESN'T MAKE ANY MUSIC.

MOVIE REVIEW • OSCAR BAIT! • BY PAUL MATWYCHUK | 754 words

Pitt The Elder, Pitt The Younger

WATCHING BRAD PITT GET PROGRESSIVELY YOUNGER IS A PRETTY DULL WAY TO KILL THREE HOURS

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON
Directed by David Fincher. Starring Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, Tilda Swinton. Opens Thu, Dec 25.
★★☆☆☆

A baby is born looking like a tiny, wizened old man: deaf, half-blind, with wrinkled skin and arthritic joints. But as the years pass, he grows steadily younger. He becomes a sailor, travelling around the world, from Florida to Russia and doing a tour of duty with the U.S. Navy. He inherits a thriving factory and becomes a rich man. He visits brothels. He has an affair with the wife of a British diplomat. He marries a beautiful dancer, and they spend the first few months as husband and wife essentially living in their bedroom. They have a daughter. He gets steadily younger as his wife gets older and leaves them to "find himself," travelling through India and Tibet. Eventually he becomes a boy again, then a baby, but is so senile that he forgets everything he's experienced.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button tells an incredible story, and yet I found myself oddly unmoved by any of it, held at arm's length by David Fincher's surprisingly impersonal direction, the overly episodic, narration-heavy script, the fussed-over production design, an opaque central character, and a tiresome framing story set, bewilderingly, in a New Orleans hospital in the hours before Hurricane Katrina. To steal a metaphor from *Mad Men*, it's a gold violin: it's beautiful, but it doesn't make any music.

What message are we supposed to derive from this peculiar movie? "You never know what's coming for you," says Queenie, the Magical Negro who adopts the infant Benjamin when he's abandoned at an old folks' home by his father – a sentiment that echoes that line about life being like a box of chocolates from *Forrest Gump*, which, like *Benjamin Button*, was scripted by Eric Roth. The line feels like the film's thesis statement, but in fact, you do know what's coming: you know Button will continue to get younger and more beautiful, that his wife Daisy (Cate Blanchett) will get older (but will still keep her looks), and that they'll soon drift apart because of it. Either way, I'm not convinced that a platitude like "You never know what's coming for you" is enough of a hook to hang a nearly three-hour movie on.

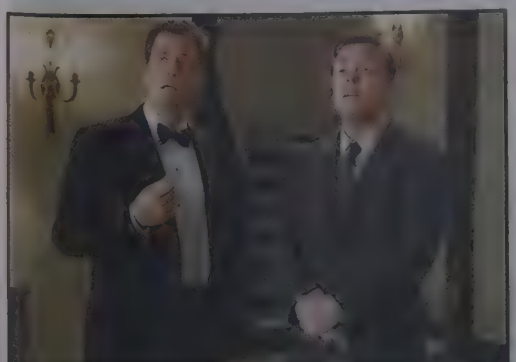
Other than the reverse-aging gimmick and the character name, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* has very little in common with the F. Scott Fitzgerald story that inspired it. In the original, Benjamin's father does not give his child up for adoption, his marriage (to a woman named Hildegarde instead of Daisy) is covered in four brisk pages, and instead of setting out to sea, Benjamin enrols in Yale. Like the film's Benjamin, though, he does eventually enlist in the military, and participates in Teddy Roosevelt's charge up San Juan Hill.

The tone of the short story is as gnomic as the film's, but it seems more in touch with the strangeness of Benjamin's situation and presents life with his unique medical "condition" as a nightmare version of existence, one that keeps him from ever fully making friends or establishing comfortable relationships with his father, his wife, or his son. There's nothing in Fincher's sentimentalized film to match Fitzgerald's troubling yet poetic concluding paragraphs as Benjamin, now an infant, loses all his memories of "his brave days at college, of the glittering years when he flustered the hearts of many girls" and sees only "the white, safe walls of his crib ... and a great big orange ball that Nana pointed at just before his twilight bed hour and called 'sun.'"

The makeup and computer effects that put Brad Pitt's head only a tiny, aged body – and then gradually age him back into a smooth-faced 20-year-old – are seamless, and Pitt sells the film's conceit with some excellent physical acting. Cate Blanchett, as the love of Benjamin's life, looks fantastic, although her performance is undermined a little by Fincher's extensive use of CGI – you can't help but wonder if that's actually Blanchett up there onscreen, or if Fincher has merely composited her head onto an actual dancer's body.

Maybe that's why *Benjamin Button* seems so emotionally remote: it's not the story of a man's amazing life; it's a movie about a walking, talking special effect. Compare this film to *Man on Wire*, the recent documentary about acrobat Philippe Petit's 1972 tightrope walk between the Twin Towers in New York City. You're seeing something miraculous *actually happening* in front of you in *Man on Wire*, and it's so beautiful you want to cry. Petit is now 60 but he doesn't look a day over 30 – could *he* be aging backwards as well?

All About The Benjamin | A rejuvenated Brad Pitt courts Cate Blanchett in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. PHOTO COURTESY OF PARAMOUNT PICTURES



Is He Having A Laugh? Is He Having A Laugh? | He sure is. Ricky Gervais makes a corpulent but charming romantic lead opposite Greg Kinnear in *Ghost Town*. PHOTO COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY FOX

DVD DICTATOR • THE MOVIES YOU MUST BUY THIS TUESDAY

TEETH!

Ghost Town

CAST | Ricky Gervais, Téa Leoni, Greg Kinnear, Kristen Wiig

All of The Dictator's friends are huge Ricky Gervais fans, and yet none of them went to see the movie that contains his first lead role – scared off, one presumes, by the cheesy-looking premise (antisocial dentist dies on the operating table, and comes back to life with the power to see ghosts) and the presence of buzzkill co-stars like Tea Leoni and Greg Kinnear. Well, they missed out on seeing one of the year's better date movies, with a final line guaranteed to make even the most hard-hearted viewer go "Awwww."

CLEAVAGE!

The Duchess

CAST | Keira Knightley, Ralph Fiennes, Dominic Cooper, Charlotte Rampling

The Duchess shrewdly plays it both ways: on the one hand, this biopic about the 18th-century aristocrat Georgiana, The Duchess of Devonshire pays tribute to its subject's ahead-of-her-time role as a political operator while making feminist points about the way society excuses male sins while condemning women for the same behaviour. On the other hand, it's a great excuse for Keira Knightley to wear a bunch of sumptuous gowns and towering wigs (and for co-star Dominic Cooper to wear very little clothing at all).

HEADS!

Baghead

CAST | Ross Partridge, Steve Zissis, Greta Gerwig, Elise Muller

Uh-oh – there's going to be confusion on the DVD store new-releases rack this week, so let The Dictator walk you through it. ***Baghead*** is the mumblecore movie by Jay and Mark Duplass about a bunch of out-of-work actors who go to a cabin in the woods to bang out the script for a horror movie, only to be menaced by an actual killer. ***Towelhead***, on the other hand, is the controversial satire by *American Beauty* director Alan Ball about an Arab-American teenager who has her sexual awakening during the first Gulf War.

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MOVIE REVIEW · OSCAR BAIT! · BY PAUL MATWYCHUK 685 words

Uncertainty Principal

ONE THING YOU CAN BE SURE OF IN *DOUBT*: MERYL STREEP MAKES ONE HELLUVA TERRIFYING NUN

DOUBT
Directed by John Patrick Shanley. Starring Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams. Opens Thu, Dec 25.
★★★★½

My favourite moment in *Doubt* is entirely wordless. The nuns at a Catholic primary school in 1964 are eating dinner, with the terrifying, imperious Sister Aloysius Beauvier (Meryl Streep), the school principal, presiding at the head of the table. Even during a communal ritual like this one, the room is agonizingly silent save for the scrape of knives against the plates. The youngest woman in the room, by quite a wide margin, is the chipmunk-cheeked Sister James (Amy Adams), who extracts a piece of gristle from her mouth and puts it on her plate ... whereupon she notices Sister Aloysius quietly regarding her, disapproval radiating from behind her rimless spectacles. That's all it takes for poor Sister James to cave in: without a single word being spoken, she grimly takes the inedible clump of fat from her plate, puts it back in her mouth, and begins chewing again.

Doubt is at its best in these small displays of Sister Aloysius' power, over lapses that only seem trivial to everyone else: she disapproves of everything from ballpoint pens to taking sugar with your tea to the singing of "Frosty the Snowman" at Christmastime. She's one "mean old clam," to use Tina Fey's expression, and she especially disapproves of Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), who makes the heretical suggestion that nuns and priests should try and behave a little more like human beings toward their students and the members of the congregation. Flynn has befriended Donald, the school's only black student, and when Sister Aloysius hears about a mysterious, apparently emotional encounter between Flynn and Donald, she requires no prompting to conclude that Flynn is guilty of *some* form of sexual impropriety.

But it's impossible to know for sure what actually happened: Flynn offers a perfectly innocent explanation for what happened, but it doesn't quite account for his or Donald's odd behaviour later that day. Plus, as Flynn himself says in the sermon that opens the movie – a speech which dutifully sets out writer/director John Patrick Shanley's Big Theme – doubt is a constant in all of our lives, and indeed may be one of the only things that holds us together. I'm not convinced that Shanley's script makes a very convincing argument for that proposition – surely the only reason we have doubt about what happened between Flynn and Donald is because he declines to show it to us – but it does a very clever job of toying with your perceptions of Flynn, who seems plausibly innocent, then guilty, then innocent again with practically every other scene.

A Wimple Plan | Meryl Streep has a scheme to bring down a seemingly untrustworthy priest in *Doubt*. PHOTO COURTESY OF MIRAMAX FILMS

As a director (this is the first time he's stepped behind the camera since 1990's *Joe Versus the Volcano*), Shanley hammers home his points too loudly, whether he's making an obvious contrast between the nuns at dinner and the priests rowdily joking and smoking as they dig into their blood-red slabs of beef, or shooting Streep from an ominous low angle, as if she were Vincent Price in *The Witchfinder General*. (He also gives *Doubt* the most portentously Gothic weather patterns since *Wuthering Heights*.)

But as a writer, Shanley (who was inspired by his own boyhood experiences in Catholic school) fills the film with telling social details that vividly recreate the mores of this bygone time – the awkward social dancing classes in the gymnasium, the way Flynn automatically takes Sister Aloysius' seat behind her desk when he visits her in her office. I was reminded a little of *Mad Men* in the way Doubt shows how the early '60s, which can seem like such a modern period, had social customs that can seem as peculiar and alien as an Edith Wharton novel.

That old world is the territory of Sister Aloysius – I'd call Meryl Streep's performance "juicy," except the character seems so pinched and dry. I'm not sure if Streep gives Sister Aloysius much inner life, but she definitely nails the externals – the darting, cunning eyes, the Bronx bray that she slips into on the rare occasions she becomes emotional. She's a character to haunt any Catholic schoolboy's nightmares, and of that I have not the slightest shred of doubt.

MOVIE REVIEW · HISTORICAL THRILLER · BY JAMES HAMILTON | 478 words

You Had Me At "Hello, Let's Kill Hitler"

Eyepatches Wide Shut | Tom Cruise is the one-eyed would-be Hitler-killer Claus von Stauffenberg in Bryan Singer's *Valkyrie*. PHOTO COURTESY OF MGM

TOM CRUISE LEADS AN ASSASSINATION PLOT IN *VALKYRIE*. SPOILER ALERT: IT'S NOT SUCCESSFUL

VALKYRIE

Directed by Bryan Singer. Starring Tom Cruise, Bill Nighy, Tom Wilkinson, Terrence Stamp. Opens Thu, Dec 25.

★★★½☆

'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring – except for a secret cadre of high-ranking German military officers planning to assassinate Adolf Hitler during the height of the Second World War, thus destroying the Nazi party and ending their atrocities months before the Allies had to.

Director Bryan Singer takes a break from Kryptonians and X-Mutants to bring us *Valkyrie*, the true story of the plot (the last of 15) to kill Hitler, masterminded by Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg (Tom Cruise), a proud German officer who finds himself blown apart after a futile battle on the African front.

Half the man he was and with a hate-on for Hitler, von Stauffenberg joins a movement of army officials and politicians tired of watching Hitler and his Nazis lead their country and all of Europe into ruin. The plan is to kill Hitler and overthrow the Nazi government from the inside. Von Stauffenberg draws the short straw and is thrust into taking out the Big H himself. Needless to say, it does not go well. (It's compelling to watch the conspirators flip-flop on which side to stand once Hitler proves impossible to kill and Operation Valkyrie begins to dissolve.)

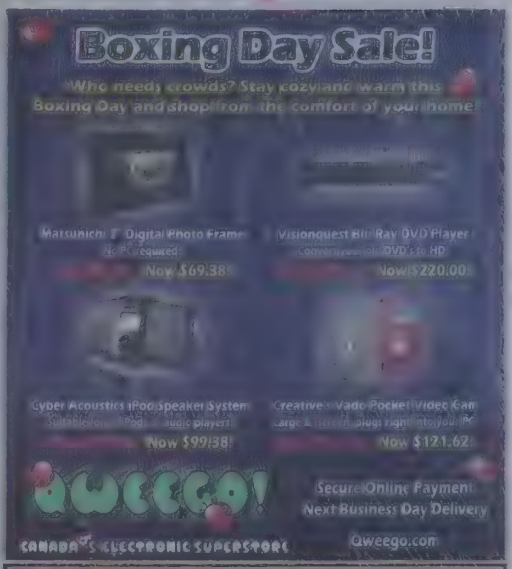
I appreciated Cruise's toned-down performance, which allows *Valkyrie* to spin an intricate web of conspiracy rather than turn into a Tom Cruise star vehicle. Oh sure, he might top the marquee, but his portrayal of the dishonoured-yet-honourable von Stauffenberg is just one element of a larger whole.

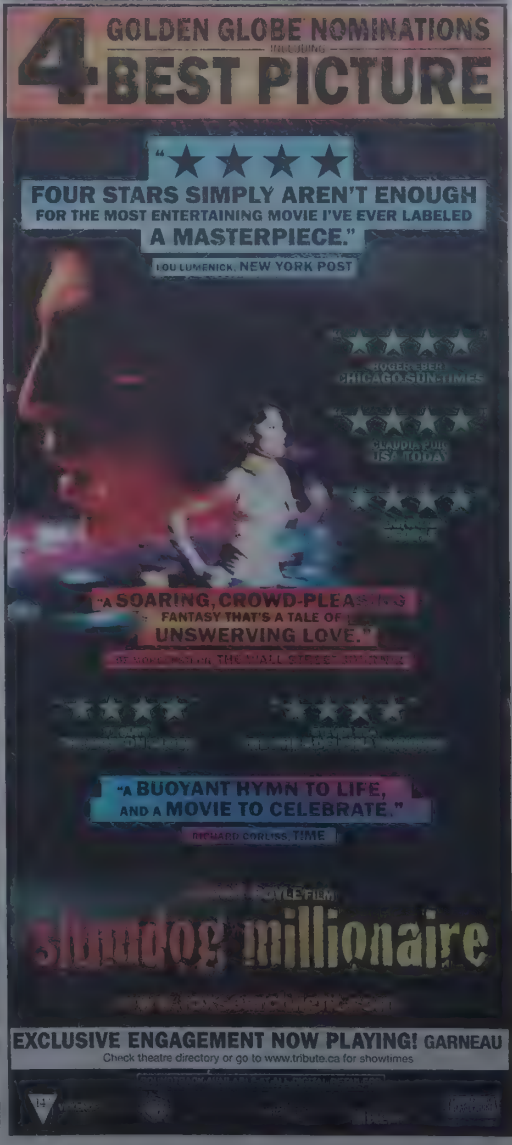
In fact, Singer takes every available opportunity to "ug" Cruise up (as if putting him in a Nazi uniform wasn't enough) by blowing off an arm, half a hand, and an eye all within the film's first 10 minutes. This gives Cruise little choice but to take a vacation from Pretty-Boy Land and blend, fairly seamlessly, into *Valkyrie*'s amazingly talented ensemble cast. Sharing screen time with a veritable character actor master-class that includes Tom Wilkinson, Bill Nighy, and Kenneth Branagh, Cruise has little choice but to stand in the corner and quietly seethe – which, luckily, he does very well.

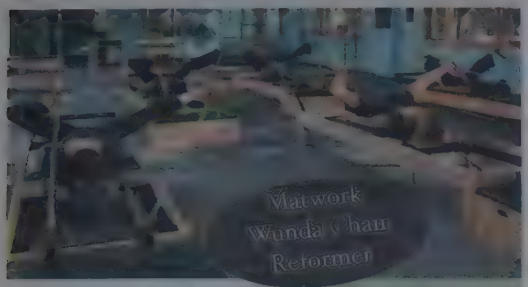
My big complaint with *Valkyrie* was that it spends so little time on the other characters' desperate motives for eliminating Hitler. We in the audience know why we want to see the little bastard popped, but why do these loyal German soldiers? I get von Stauffenberg's rationale – he's essentially a disgruntled employee who sees the writing on the wall – but what about Operation Valkyrie's other planners? The lack of information muddles up an otherwise tight thriller, one so detailed that it often seems more like a historical reenactment than an action thriller.

Still, *Valkyrie* is a standout thriller filled with flawed heroes, catastrophic missteps, and a fascinating "what-if" scenario that will stick with you as you snuggle in for your long winter's nap.

***VALKYRIE* TAKES EVERY AVAILABLE OPPORTUNITY TO "UG" CRUISE UP BY BLOWING OFF AN ARM, HALF A HAND, AND AN EYE ALL WITHIN THE FILM'S FIRST 10 MINUTES.**







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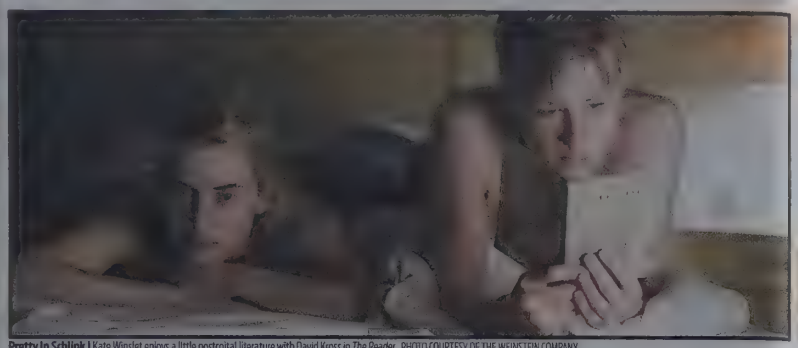
THE CONSPIRACY BEGINS TOMORROW

MOVIE REVIEW · OSCAR BAIT! · BY KATHLEEN BELL | 520 words

Bonin' The Librarian



Pretty In Schlink | Kate Winslet enjoys a little postcoital literature with David Kross in *The Reader*. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY

THERE'S A LOT MORE TO CONTEMPLATE IN *THE READER* THAN THE OLDER WOMAN/ TEENAGE BOY SEX SCENES

THE READER
Directed by Stephen Daldry. Starring Kate Winslet, Ralph Fiennes, David Kross. Opens Thu, Dec 25.
★★★½☆

Somewhere in the back of my mind, 15 minutes into *The Reader* ...

Oh no. This is going to be one of those "kid seduced by older woman and consequently scarred for life" movies. How old is that boy supposed to be? More importantly, how old is he in real life? He's gotta be at least 18 'cause I think you could get charged with something for getting a kid to do that, even if he's acting. I'm uncomfortable. Is Kate Winslet the "bad guy"? I can't believe they used the old "You're filthy. Take off your clothes, I'll wash them while you have a bath" shtick. What's the difference between porn and an Oscar-nominated movie? Probably the soundtrack. Oh, he's reading to her, that's a nice break from the sex.

Based on a novel by Bernhard Schlink, so it went for the first half hour. In the summer of 1958, 15-year-old Michael Berg (played by David Kross with a subtlety beyond his years) gets a sexual education from Hanna Schmitz (Kate Winslet), a proud, fiery 38-year-old.

After we get past this seemingly directionless romance (or corruption of a minor, if you prefer), and after Hanna splits with nary a Dear John letter, we have a slightly more mature Michael attending law school. Older and – shocker – scarred by his underage interlude, he finds himself attending the war-crimes trial of six female internment camp guards. While his classmates are ready to hang the lot, Michael is wracked with ambivalence because one of the guards is his ex-lover, Hanna.

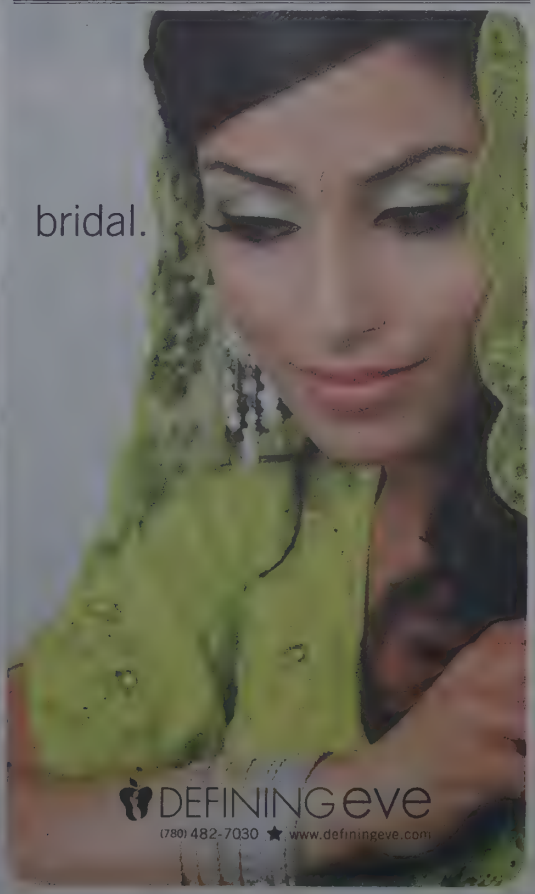
Winslet does a spectacular job as the accused, creating the sympathy and ambiguity the story requires. Her eyes display a wide-eyed naïveté, her mouth, sharp dedication to the task she was charged with and, in total, her face is consistently confused by the proceedings. To Hanna, being a guard was a job and she was simply executing her duties to the best of her abilities. She begs of the tribunal, "Should I have not applied for the position?"

Michael's professor then asks his own question: are legality and morality the same thing? In Hitler's Germany, clearly not. But ask of the film what is moral and things aren't as crystal. Is forgiveness possible? Can we live to survive our pasts?

Certain movies linger at the nape of your neck, while others linger in your heart – *The Reader* haunts your head. Michael makes certain decisions in the film out of fear his affair will be found out, out of a desire to avoid confronting Hanna, and out of respect for Hanna's sinful sense of pride. In the end you'll wonder if any of it was necessary, just, or kind.

These kinds of movies are intimidating. We avoid the questions they raise, simply because we can't think of the answers. I don't believe *The Reader* is sure of its own conclusions, so letting the marvelous acting wash over you is as good a response as any.

Oh, storytime is over! Back to the sex....



MOVIE REVIEW · TRAINWRECK! · BY WARREN HAAS | 499 words

The Flesh Is Thrilling, But *The Spirit* Is Weak

SCARLETT JOHANSSON AND EVA MENDES' CURVES CAN'T REDEEM THE UTTER AWFULNESS OF FRANK MILLER'S CAMPY NOIR

THE SPIRIT
Directed by Frank Miller. Starring Gabriel Macht, Samuel L. Jackson, Eva Mendes, Scarlett Johansson. Opens Thu, Dec 25.
☆☆☆☆☆

The most painless way to review *The Spirit* would be to make a list of all the things wrong with it (everything) and just leave it at that, but then all references to the terrible over-the-top acting, atrocious dialogue, and pointless use of computer animation would have no context. Unfortunately, the film doesn't really provide any context for its well-below-amateur-level filmmaking and acting, unless being the most abominable movie of the decade counts.

Based on Will Eisner's comic book series, *The Spirit* is (allegedly) the story of the titular crimefighter (Gabriel Macht) who watches over Central City and does battle with the (supposedly) evil Octopus (Samuel L. Jackson). The film's writer and director, Frank Miller, opts to continue with the high-contrast, overly stylized presentation that he and Robert Rodriguez used to successfully create campy noir in *Sin City*. But *Sin City* was based on Miller's own comics, and that film's look, for better or worse, was derived from his actual artwork; the same cannot be said of *The Spirit*, as Eisner's original drawings resemble colourful Sunday cartoons as opposed to gritty crime sagas. This leaves me thinking that Miller was hoping to leave his own personal stamp on the film adaptation. Well, congratulations, Mr. Miller: your trademark is the stench of incompetence.

Like many failed screen versions of comics, *The Spirit* forgets – rather, never comprehends – that it is supposed to be an adaptation to film and not a projection of comic book panels onto a screen. This is the only way to explain why Eva Mendes and Scarlett Johansson were cast as femme fatales Sand Saref and Silken Floss, as they are two actresses better known for their curves than, well, anything else. Miller is so eager to showcase their physical assets that Johansson's cleavage and Mendes' derrière could rightly receive top billing. (At one point Mendes sits on a photocopier and hits the start button.)

Crediting body parts rather than people would actually make sense, because everyone who gets dialogue sounds as if they were delivering it in their first afterschool improv class. Whether it's Miller's screenplay or his direction that's at fault (if not both), somebody involved in the production of this film should have told him that he was making not a movie, but a childish mishmash of awful slapstick humour, unintelligible (fight) scenes, and repeated allusions to Nazi sympathy. Let me elaborate on this last point. Samuel L. Jackson and Johansson don German army fatigues, complete with swastika arm patches, and stand in front of a giant photo of Hitler. This has nothing to do with anything else in the movie.

It's never clear if *The Spirit* is trying to be a parody of a parody of itself, but it's definitely never funny, not even because it is so terrible. Why this movie has the audacity to leave itself open to a sequel is also a mystery. The only certainty is that Frank Miller should never be allowed to work in Hollywood again.

A Sight For Sore Eisner | Gabriel Macht should be thankful he gets to remain masked in every scene of *The Spirit*. PHOTO COURTESY OF LIONSGATE

MOVIE REVIEW · FOREIGN · BY MICHAEL HINGSTON | 416 words

I've Kind Of Half-Heartedly Liked You, *So Long*

SORRY: YOUR ARTIFICIAL PLOTTING AND LOW-ENERGY DIRECTION KEPT ME FROM BEING A BIGGER FAN

I'VE LOVED YOU SO LONG
Directed by Philippe Claudel. Starring Kristin Scott Thomas, Elsa Zylberstein, Serge Hazanavicius. Opens Fri, Dec 26.
★★★☆☆

Near the climax of *I've Loved You So Long*, a tearful woman sits in a doctor's office. She has brought him a piece of paper with cryptic medical notes on it, and he looks up at her with a look of shock on his face. "Where did you get this photocopy?" he asks her, aghast.

This is meant to be a gut-punch of a scene, as Léa Fontaine (Elsa Zylberstein) finally begins to understand what drove her sister Juliette (Kristin Scott Thomas) to murder 15 years earlier – a crime for which she has only just been released from prison. (She has since moved into Léa's guest room.) But it doesn't work, despite Zylberstein's solid performance as a conflicted but essentially well-meaning sibling. Why not?

Because nobody would say the word "photocopy" in that sentence. It's completely artificial. Writer/director Philippe Claudel clearly needed to convey that Léa has made a copy of Juliette's document so she wouldn't notice it missing, but he didn't know how to properly show it. So he tells it, awkwardly, and the façade of reality crumbles. We are hearing the squeaks of a poorly oiled machine.

Similar problems plague the rest of Claudel's script, and his overall direction is rather sluggish. Most importantly, until those final minutes, we are never given a good reason to sympathize with Juliette other than the simple fact that she's the main character, and hence onscreen the most. Scott Thomas plays her with the right amount of opacity, but she doesn't say, do, or feel much of anything – a strange choice for a protagonist.

That being said, the cast does what it can. Scott Thomas is being hailed as a Best Actress Oscar contender, and she is good, but I was far more impressed with Zylberstein and her frazzled husband Luc (Serge Hazanavicius), who struggle to incorporate Juliette into their already-busy lives, complete with time-draining jobs, their two adopted Vietnamese daughters, and Luc's mute, live-in father. The casting of the sisters, though, is inspired: they look similar enough to be family, but Léa's soft features are a stark counterpoint to Juliette's more weary, prison-hardened face.

One other nagging problem: my French is high-school calibre at best, but the subtitles are severely lacking. When Luc says he doesn't like Japanese movies, it's transcribed as "Jap movies," and even the song lyrics that contain the film's title come out differently. You expect this sort of thing from live closed captioning, but a prestige film should probably aim a bit higher.

She Speaks Fluent French, Too! | Kristin Scott Thomas continues to prove her total awesomeness with her foreign-language performance in *I've Loved You So Long*. PHOTO COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

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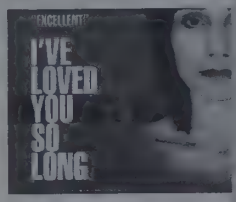

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MATINEES @ 2:30 pm
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MOVIE GUIDE **WHAT'S PLAYING IN THE THEATRES**

Bad Dog! | Don't be misled by the title: even though it comes out on Dec. 25, *Marley & Me* is not another adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*. PHOTO COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY FOX

OPENING THIS WEEK

BEDTIME STORIES
Adam Sandler, Keri Russell, Guy Pearce, and Courteney Cox star in *Hairspray* director Adam Shankman's family comedy about a janitor who discovers that the stories he tells his kids each night are coming true in real life.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON
Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, Tilda Swinton, and Taraji P. Henson star in *Zodiac* director David Fincher's strange fantasy about a man who is born as an old man, and then proceeds to get younger as he gets "older." Based on the short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

DOUBT
Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, and Viola Davis star in director John Patrick Shanley's film version of his award-winning stage play, set at a Bronx Catholic school in 1964, about a nun who becomes convinced that a priest has made inappropriate sexual advances to one of his students.

I'VE LOVED YOU SO LONG
Kristin Scott Thomas, Elsa Zylberstein, and Serge Hazanavicius star in writer/director Philippe Claudel's drama about a woman, still nursing a traumatic incident from her past, who comes to live with her younger sister and her husband after having been estranged from her family for 15 years. In French with English subtitles.

MARLEY & ME
Jennifer Anison, Owen Wilson, and Haley Bennett star in *The Devil Wears Prada* director David Frankel's sentimental comedy, based on John Grogan's bestselling memoir, about a young couple's love-hate relationship with their adorable but hopelessly ill-behaved dog.

THE READER
Kate Winslet, Ralph Fiennes, David Kross, and Bruno Ganz star in *The Hours* director Stephen Daldry's film version of Bernhard Schlink's novel about a teenaged boy who has an affair with an older woman, and then later learns she served as a guard at a camp for Jewish prisoners during the Second World War.

THE SPIRIT
Gabriel Macht, Scarlett Johansson, Samuel L. Jackson, Eva Mendes, and Jaime King star in *Sin City* co-director Frank Miller's ultra-stylized, spectacularly crappy film version of Will Eisner's influential comic strip about a cop who returns from the dead to fight crime as a masked vigilante.

VALKYRIE
Tom Cruise, Kenneth Branagh, Tom Wilkinson, Bill Nighy, and Carice Van Houten star in *The Usual Suspects* director Bryan Singer's historical thriller, based on the true story of the July 1944 attempt by a group of German army officers to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

ALSO PLAYING

AUSTRALIA
A flopperoo, scored with didgeridoo.
★½☆☆☆

BOLT
Surprisingly zippy computer-animated comedy about a canine TV hero forced to fend for himself in the real world. Not quite up to Pixar standards, but a solid *Kung Fu Panda*-level crowd-pleaser.
★★★½☆

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL
Keanu Reeves is perfectly cast as an emotionless alien in this remake of the 1951 sci-fi classic; too bad the movie is perfectly awful.
★☆☆☆☆

FOUR CHRISTMASES
Surviving Christmas, Christmas With the Kranks, Deck the Halls, Jingle All the Way, Fred Claus, Christmas in Wonderland ... now this lame Reese Witherspoon/Vince Vaughn comedy takes its place in the pantheon of lousy holiday movies.
★½☆☆☆

MADAGASCAR: ESCAPE 2 AFRICA
It's a little top-heavy with celebrity voices and the computer-generated camera moves are a little too shallowly "dazzling," but there are enough clever gags lurking around the edges to make this a painless night out with the kids.
★★½☆☆

MILK
With Gus Van Sant behind the camera, you'd expect this biopic about slain politician and gay-rights activist Harvey Milk to be more stylistically adventurous. But Sean Penn and Josh Brolin are both fantastic, the recreation of late-'70s San Francisco is vivid and joyous, and God knows the political message couldn't be timelier.
★★★½☆

NOTHING LIKE THE HOLIDAYS
An attempt to do for Hispanic audiences what Tyler Perry has done for African-Americans: create an overstuffed mix of broad family comedy and melodrama — with a lot of Christmastime sentiment poured over top of it all. Pleasant and utterly forgettable.
★★☆☆☆

SEVEN POUNDS
Will Smith has a plan to benefit the lives of seven strangers — an utterly preposterous plan that involves identity theft, a poisonous jellyfish, a bathtub full of ice, and an abusive phonecall to a blind Woody Harrelson.
★★☆☆☆

SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE
Every Oscar season, there's always a "little movie that could" that emerges as the crowd-pleasing contender to win Best Picture. This gimmicky but winning urban fairytale about a Mumbai slum kid who wins a fortune on a TV game show is 2008's answer to *Juno* and *Little Miss Sunshine* — and it's better than either of them.
★★★★☆

THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX
This film version of Kate DiCamillo's wonderful children's book about a soup-loving rat has its heart in the right place, and it puts some lovely images up on the screen but somehow it never quite gathers enough momentum to seem like more than a pale retread of *Ratatouille*.
★★½☆☆

TWILIGHT
Unevenly paced and often awkwardly acted, this movie version of Stephenie Meyer's teen-vampire novel still has enough swoony romance to win over the 12-year-old girls in the audience — or the inner 12-year-old in the moms accompanying them to the theatre.
★★½☆☆

YES MAN
Jim Carrey should have said no to this script! Zing! Okay, okay, but in our defence, we put more work into that joke than the three screenwriters put into developing this flimsy premise. Extra demerits for some of the most obnoxiously rampant product placement of the year.
★★☆☆☆

BEYOND THE BLURBS · ALTERNATIVE CRITICS HAVE THEIR SAY

Youth Without Youth | Brad Pitt doesn't look a day over 65 in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. PHOTO COURTESY OF PARAMOUNT PICTURES

THIS WEEK: THE CURIOUS CASE OF *THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON*

Anne Thompson, *Variety* | "David Fincher and screenwriter Eric Roth have delivered an historic achievement, a masterful piece of cinema, and a moving treatise on death, loss, loneliness and love. As the movie proceeds, and Brad Pitt ages backwards, we know where he is headed: it's where we are all going. But he feels he has to go there by himself, without his loved ones. And nobody wants to die alone. So when the movie reaches its climax, it [redacted] extraordinarily moving (although some find the movie cold and dispassionate). It may pack [redacted] more powerful punch the older you are and the more people you have lost. In that case it will score with the Academy, who will also recognize the skilful filmmaking on display."

Nick Schager, *Slant* | "The film's more cloying inclinations never overwhelm because Fincher and his performers treat their tale with just enough detachment to give it a beautiful, enchanting refracted-through-gossamer (or -time) quality. It's a subtle balancing act, and one far less obviously dexterous than the vast data-streamlining of *Zodiac*. Yet his work here is, in [redacted] way, no less impressive, exhibiting both [redacted] technical deftness and heartrending urgency that's ultimately overpowering. Fincher (like his spiritual stand-in, the intro's clockmaker) so in command of his material and his medium that, even in a world as simultaneously rapturous and maddening as *Benjamin Button*, he seems capable at any given moment [redacted] producing magic."

Karina Longworth, *Spout* | "There's no doubt that Fincher is in love with his imagery – this is the only explanation I can come up with for that chaos theory sequence, which plays as nothing but [redacted] haunting of Fincher's contractual right to final cut), but he doesn't seem [redacted] trust it. Eric Roth's script tells us over and over again, in very literal language and often via narration, that this is a film about loneliness and difference. Every feeling and every story detail is telegraphed in advance, underlined throughout and commented on after the fact. Button [redacted] the opposite [redacted] Pitt's last Oscar hopeful [redacted] that respect, *The Assassination of Jesse James* [redacted] film in which every frame seemed to invite contemplation. *Benjamin Button* is [redacted] film in which every cut seems designed to block thought. Maybe the earlier film's failure saved [redacted] all about the philosophy behind *Button's* construction: for audiences and Oscar voters, thinking is bad. Spoon-fed artifice is good."

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MILK 14A
Fri-Thurs 6:45, 9:10; Fri-Sun, Thurs matinees 2:00 [redacted] 9:10 p.m. show Dec. 31. Violence.

I LOVED YOU SO LONG STC
Fri-Thurs 6:55, 9:05; Fri-Sun, Thurs matinees 2:30. No 9:05 p.m. show Dec. 31.

SYNECDOCHE NEW YORK 14A
Fri-Tues 6:45, 9:10; Sat & Sun matinees 2:00. Coarse language, nudity.

THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS PG
Fri-Tues 7:00; Sat & Sun matinees 1:00. Mature themes, disturbing content.

RACHEL GETTING MARRIED 14A
Fri-Tues 9:00; Sat & Sun matinees 3:00. Coarse language, mature themes.

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BEDTIME STORIES G
Nightly 6:45, 9:00; no 9:00 p.m. show Dec. 31; matinees daily 12:45, 3:15.

MARLEY & ME PG
Nightly 7:10, 9:30; no 9:30 p.m. show Dec. 31; matinees daily 12:55, 3:25.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON PG
Nightly 7:30; matinees daily 1:30. Coarse language, not recommended for young children.

THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX G
Nightly 6:55, 9:05; no 9:05 p.m. show Dec. 31; matinees daily 1:05, 3:10.

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL PG
Nightly 7:05, 9:15; no 9:15 show Dec. 31.

BOLT G
Matinees daily 1:10, 3:00.

YES MAN 14A
Nightly 7:00, 9:10; no 9:10 show Dec. 31; matinees daily 1:00, 3:20.

SEVEN POUNDS 14A
Nightly 6:50, 9:25; no 9:25 show Dec. 31; matinees daily 12:50, 3:30. Mature themes.

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BEDTIME STORIES G
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TALE OF DESPEREAUX G
Daily 1:00, 3:00, 5:00, 6:50

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL PG
Daily 8:45. No passes.

MADAGASCAR: ESCAPE 2 AFRICA G
Daily 12:45.

TWILIGHT PG
Daily 4:35, 9:05.

BOLT G
Daily 2:30, 7:05.

YES MAN 14A
Daily 1:15, 3:15, 5:15, 7:15, 9:15. No passes.

MARLEY AND ME PG
Daily 12:40, 2:55, 5:05, 7:20, 9:25. No passes.

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MARLEY & ME PG
Nightly 6:50, 9:15; matinees daily 12:50, 3:15

BEDTIME STORIES G
Nightly 7:05, 9:25; matinees daily 1:05, 3:25

THE TALE OF THE DESPEREAUX G
Nightly 6:55, 9:10; matinees daily 12:55, 3:30

YES MAN 14A
Nightly 7:00, 9:20; matinees daily 1:00, 3:20

WETASKIWIN CINEMA 4 PLEX
3840-56 Wetaskiwin • 352-3922

MARLEY & ME PG
Nightly 6:50, 9:15; matinees daily 12:50, 3:15

BEDTIME STORIES G
Nightly 7:05, 9:25; matinees daily 1:05, 3:25

THE TALE OF THE DESPEREAUX G
Nightly 6:55, 9:10; matinees daily 12:55, 3:30

YES MAN 14A
Nightly 7:00, 9:20; matinees daily 1:00, 3:20

SOUTH EDMONTON
1525 99 Street • 436-8585

BEDTIME STORIES G
Fri-Thurs 12:00, 2:30, 5:00, 7:30, 10:00. No passes

MARLEY & ME PG
Fri-Thurs 1:15, 4:30, 7:40, 10:15. No passes

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON [redacted]
Fri-Thurs 12:15, 2:00, 4:00, 6:15, 8:00, 10:00. Not recommended for young children, coarse language. [redacted] passes.

THE SPIRIT 14A
Fri-Thurs 1:30, 4:00, 7:40, 10:30

VALKYRIE PG
Fri-Thurs 12:20, 3:10, [redacted] 9:45. Coarse language, violence.

THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX G
Fri-Thurs 12:00, 2:20, 4:45, 7:00, 9:20.

SEVEN POUNDS 14A
Fri-Thurs 1:20, 4:10, 7:00, 10:10. Mature themes. No passes

YES MAN PG
Fri-Thurs 12:50, 3:20, 7:15, 10:20. Mature themes. No passes

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL PG
Fri-Thurs 12:30, 3:30, 7:30, 10:30

DOUBT PG
Fri-Thurs 1:40, 4:01, 6:50, 9:45. Mature themes.

RAB NE BANA DI JODI (HINDI W/E.S.T.) PG
Fri-Thurs 5:00, 9:00

FOUR CHRISTMASES PG
Fri-Thurs 12:10, 2:40, 5:00, 7:15, 9:50. Language may offend, crude content.

BOLT G
Fri-Thurs 12:10, 2:30, 4:50, 7:20, 9:40

TWILIGHT PG
Fri-Thurs 1:15, 4:40, 7:20, 10:20. Violence.

QUANTUM OF SOLACE 14A
Fri-Thurs 1:00, 3:50, 6:45, 9:30

MADAGASCAR: ESCAPE 2 AFRICA G
Fri-Thurs 11:50, 2:25

NORTH EDMONTON
14231 137th Avenue • 732-2223

BEDTIME STORIES G
Fri-Thurs 12:30, 2:50, 5:10, 7:40, 10:15. No passes

MARLEY & ME PG
Fri-Thurs 1:10, 4:00, 7:20, 10:05. [redacted] passes.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON [redacted]
Fri-Thurs 2:15, 6:20, 10:00. Not recommended for young children, coarse language.

THE SPIRIT 14A
Fri-Thurs 1:50, 5:00, 8:00, 10:40

VALKYRIE PG
Fri-Thurs 1:30, 4:30, 7:30, 10:20. Coarse language, violence.

THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX G
Fri-Thurs 12:10, 2:20, 4:40, 7:05, 9:20. No passes

SEVEN POUNDS 14A
Fri-Thurs 1:20, 4:10, 7:00, 9:55. Mature themes. No passes

YES MAN [redacted]
Fri-Thurs 12:20, 2:45, 5:15, 7:50, 10:20. Mature themes. [redacted] passes.

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL PG
Fri-Thurs 1:15, 3:40, 6:40, 9:10

DOUBT PG
Fri-Thurs 12:50, 3:30, 6:30, 9:00. Mature theme.

FOUR CHRISTMASES PG
Fri-Thurs 12:40, 3:00, 5:20, 7:25, 10:10. Language may offend, crude content.

BOLT G
Fri-Thurs 12:00, 2:30, 4:45, 7:15, 9:40

TWILIGHT PG
Fri-Thurs 1:00, 3:50, 6:50, 9:30. Violence.

QUANTUM OF SOLACE 14A
Fri-Thurs 1:40, 4:20, 7:10, 9:50.

MADAGASCAR: ESCAPE TO AFRICA G
Fri-Thurs 12:05

CITY CENTRE 9 CINEMAS
380 FLOOR PLAZA II, 101 st. & 102 AVE • 471-7020

YES MAN [redacted]
Fri-Thurs 12:40, 3:20, 7:10, 9:50. Mature themes. No passes.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON PG
Fri-Thurs 12:00, 3:40, 8:00. [redacted] recommended for young children, coarse language. [redacted] passes.

BEDTIME STORIES G
Fri-Thurs 12:05, 3:05, 7:00, 9:35. No passes.

SEVEN POUNDS 14A
Fri-Thurs 12:50, 3:50, 6:45, 9:55. Mature themes.

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL PG
Fri-Thurs 12:20, 3:00, 6:35, 9:00

THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX G
Fri-Thurs 1:00, 3:30, 7:10.

VALKYRIE PG
Fri-Thurs 12:10, 3:35, 6:40, 9:40. Violence, coarse language.

DOUBT STC
Fri-Thurs 12:30, 3:10, 6:55, 9:20.

THE READER 18A
Fri-Thurs 12:25, 3:15, 6:30, 9:10. Sexual content.

FOUR CHRISTMASES PG
Fri-Thurs 9:30. Language may offend, crude content.

CLAREVIEW 10 CINEMAS
421 I-139TH AVENUE • 472-7600

TWILIGHT PG
Fri-Thur 1:05, 3:55, 6:30, 9:15. Violence.

FOUR CHRISTMASES PG
Fri-Thurs 9:00. Crude content, language may offend.

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL PG
Fri-Thurs 1:55, 5:00, 7:25, 9:50.

YES MAN PG
Fri-Sun 1:40, 4:35, 7:10, 9:45; Mon-Thurs 1:40, 4:35, 7:10, 9:45. Mature themes. No passes.

THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX G
Fri-Thurs 1:50, 4:20, 6:45.

SEVEN POUNDS 14A
Fri-Sun 1:15, 4:00, 6:40, 9:25; Mon-Thurs 1:15, 4:00, 6:40, 9:25. Mature themes. No passes.

MARLEY & ME PG
Fri-Thurs 1:20, 4:10, 6:50, 9:35. No passes.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON PG
Fri-Thurs 1:10, 4:50, 8:30. Not recommended for young children, coarse language. No passes.

THE SPIRIT STC
Fri-Thurs 2:10, 4:40, 7:15, 9:40

VALKYRIE PG
Fri-Thurs 1:00, 3:50, 6:35, 9:20. Violence, coarse language.

BEDTIME STORIES G
Fri-Thurs 2:40, 4:25, 7:00, 9:30

WESTMOUNT CENTRE CINEMAS
111 AVENUE & GROAT ROAD • 455-0726

YES MAN PG
Fri-Sun 1:15, 3:55, 7:05, 9:35; Mon-Thurs 1:15, 3:55, 7:05, 9:35. Mature themes. No passes.

VALKYRIE PG
Fri-Thurs 12:45, 3:30, 6:40, 9:20. Coarse language, violence.

MARLEY & ME PG
Fri-Thurs 1:00, 3:45, 6:55, 9:45. No passes.

THE SPIRIT PG
Fri-Thurs 1:74, 4:05, 7:15, 9:55

SCOTIABANK THEATRE
WEST EDMONTON MALL • 9882-170 STREET • 444-2400

BEDTIME STORIES G
Fri-Thurs 11:45, 2:20, 4:50, 7:30, 10:10. No passes.

MARLEY & ME PG
Fri-Thurs 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, 9:30. No passes.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON PG
Fri-Thurs 12:00, 4:00, 8:00. Not recommended for young children, coarse language.

THE SPIRIT 14A
Fri-Thurs 12:30, 3:50, 7:10, 9:50.

VALKYRIE PG
Fri-Thurs 12:20, 4:20, 7:20, 10:20. Coarse language, violence.

THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX G
Fri-Thurs 12:10, 2:30, 4:40, 7:15. No passes.

SEVEN POUNDS 14A
Fri-Thurs 12:40, 3:40, 7:00, 10:00. Mature themes. No passes.

YES MAN PG
Fri-Thurs 1:10, 4:30, 7:30, 10:10. Mature themes. No passes.

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL PG
Fri-Thurs 9:40

FOUR CHRISTMASES PG
Fri-Thurs 1:20, 4:15, 6:50, 9:10. Language may offend, crude content.

BOLT G
Fri-Thurs 1:00, 4:00.

TWILIGHT PG
Fri-Thurs 6:50, 9:45. Violence.

CINEMA CITY MOVIES 12
130 AVENUE & 50 STREET • 472-9779

GHAJINI (HINDI W/E.S.T) STC
Fri-Thurs 1:00, 4:35, 8:15

AUSTRALIA PG
Fri-Sat 12:50, 4:05, 7:35, 11:00; Sun-Thurs 12:50, 4:05, 7:35

TRANSPORTER 3 14A
Fri-Sat 1:[redacted] 4:30, 7:10, 9:40, 11:55; Sun-Thurs 1:40, 4:30, 7:20, 9:40

ROLE MODELS 14A
Fri-Sat 1:55, 4:40, 7:15, 9:20, 11:45; Sun-Thurs 1:55, 4:40, 7:15, 9:20. Crude content, coarse language.

HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL 3: SENIOR YEAR G
Fri-Thurs 1:15, 2:05, 4:05, 4:50, 6:45, 7:25, 9:55

CHANGELING 14A
Fri-Thurs 1:05, 4:05, 6:55, 9:50.

MAX PAYNE 14A
Fri-Sat 9:25, 11:50; Sun-Thurs 9:25. Violence.

BODY OF LIES 14A
Fri-Sat 4:10, 6:55, 9:35, 12:10; Sun-Thurs 4:10, 6:55, 9:35. Coarse language, brutal violence.

BEVERLY HILLS CHIHUAHUA G
Fri-Thurs 1:20, 2:00, 4:00, 4:45, 7:20, 9:50

RACHEL GETTING MARRIED STC
Fri-Sat 1:25, 4:15, 6:50, 9:20, 11:40; Sun-Thurs 1:25, 6:50, 9:20

EAGLE EYE 14A
Fri-Sat 1:35, 4:25, 7:00, 9:45, 12:10; Sun-Thurs 1:35, 4:25, 7:00, 9:45

IGOR PG
Fri-Thurs 1:30

THE DARK KNIGHT PG
Fri-Sat 7:40, 11:20; Sun-Thurs 7:40
Violence, frightening scenes, not recommended for young children.

GALAXY CINEMAS
2020 SHERWOOD DR., SHERWOOD PARK • 416-0150

BEDTIME STORIES G
Fri-Thurs 1:30, 4:50, 7:40, 10:30. No passes.

MARLEY & ME PG
Fri-Thurs 12:50, 4:10, 6:50, 9:30. No passes.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON PG
Fri-Thurs 12:00, 3:30, 8:00. Not recommended for young children, coarse language.

THE SPIRIT 14A
Fri-Thurs 12:30, 3:50, 7:10, 9:50.

VALKYRIE PG
Fri-Thurs 12:20, 4:20, 7:20, 10:20. Coarse language, violence.

THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX G
Fri-Thurs 12:10, 2:30, 4:40, 7:15. No passes.

SEVEN POUNDS 14A
Fri-Thurs 12:40, 3:40, 7:00, 10:00. Mature themes. No passes.

YES MAN PG
Fri-Thurs 1:10, 4:30, 7:30, 10:10. Mature themes. No passes.

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL PG
Fri-Thurs 9:40

FOUR CHRISTMASES PG
Fri-Thurs 1:20, 4:15, 6:50, 9:10. Language may offend, crude content.

BOLT G
Fri-Thurs 1:00, 4:00.

TWILIGHT PG
Fri-Thurs 6:50, 9:45. Violence.

"'DID THEY TAKE US TO THE PARK THIS TIME?' 'NO ... IT'S A FIRE. **ANOTHER HORRIBLE FIRE.**' 'WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH THESE PEOPLE?'

BOOKS PROFILE · **QUICKFIRE COMEDY** · BY MICHAEL HINGSTON | 753 words

Brevity Is The Soul Of Rich

SIMON RICH KEEPS THE WORD COUNT LOW AND THE HUMOUR QUOTIENT HIGH IN *FREE-RANGE CHICKENS*

FREE-RANGE CHICKENS
By Simon Rich. Random House. 144 pp. $20
★★★★☆

Simon Rich is having some communication troubles. The 24-year-old author and *Saturday Night Live* writer is staying at a cabin in Maine, but a recent storm has knocked out the power, including the phones.

I eventually reach him on his cell, where the signal is spotty but, for the time being, serviceable. "This is my only link to society," he deadpans, adding, "I don't need supplies. I'm totally safe. What do people normally say – something nice to their families? Yeah. Something nice and generic to my family."

Rich, whose family includes father and *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich, has several projects on the go, but the occasion for our interview is the recent publication of *Free-Range Chickens*, his second collection of humour pieces in as many years. Like 2007's *Ant Farm*, the new book is a slim but concentrated flurry of mini-essays, lists, and imagined dialogues that, while hilarious, are also firmly rooted in unease.

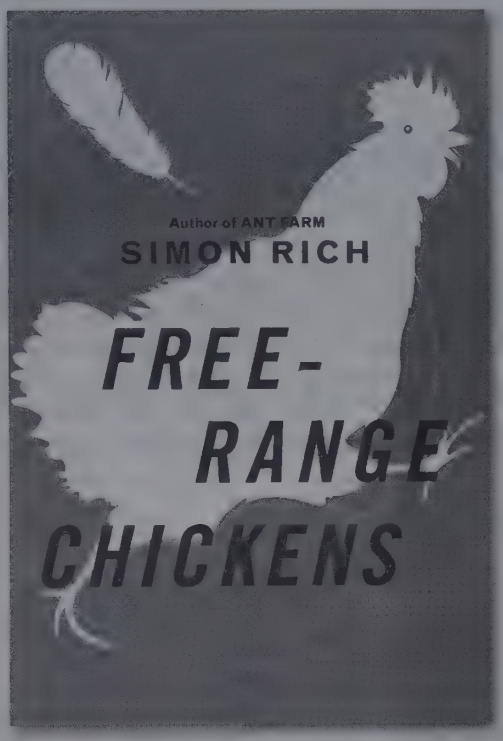
"The original title for the first book was *Horrible Situations*, and my editor said it was too blunt, and not subtle or artful enough," he says, "so I had to change it to *Ant Farm*. In my head, the real title for *Free-Range Chickens* was *Even More Horrible Situations*. So the stakes have gotten slightly more horrible, but they're remarkably similar books."

Rich has a terrific knack for mining fresh material from everyday experiences that you'd think comedians would have long since wrung dry. *Free-Range Chickens* gets excellent mileage out of talking animals and a bumbling God (who, when asked why He struck an innocent man with a lightning bolt, replies, "Don't tell me there are *two* Joshua Alperts"), but his real strength is the endless terrors of childhood. In one memorable piece, Rich imagines a dialogue between the monsters living under his bed as a kid, whose ranks include a murderer he saw on the news, his needle-happy doctor, Freddy Krueger, and "Dead Uncle Whose Body I Saw At An Open Casket Funeral." In the middle of plotting, Krueger announces, "I've wanted to kill him ever since he saw my movie."

"I write pretty much exclusively about fear," Rich admits. "That's why so many of my pieces are about subjects that you would typically find in horror writing, which is one of my favourite genres outside of comedy.

"Like those pieces I wrote about Dracula – I'm obviously very afraid of Dracula. I always have been, since I was a small child. So writing those pieces was a very exciting project for me, because it was taking something I was terrified of and turning it into something amusing. A happy by-product of the writing process is definitely a sense of peace that comes from figuring out a way to live with the very real presence of Count Dracula."

Above all else, Rich prizes brevity. His favourite piece from the two books is "Dalmatians," which is all of four lines long: "Hey, look, the truck's stopping." "Did they take us to the park this time?" "No... it's a fire. Another horrible fire." "What the hell is wrong with these people?"

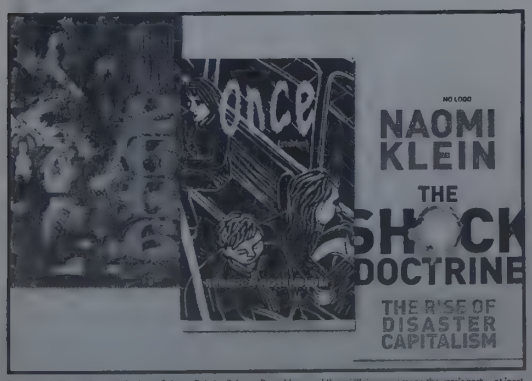


It's a virtue Rich picked up from his time at Harvard, where he was president of the illustrious humour magazine *The Harvard Lampoon*, which focuses on precisely these kinds of short-form pieces. (It is also the world's oldest humour magazine, and has served as a training ground for everyone from Conan O'Brien and *The Office*'s B.J. Novak to John Updike and William Randolph Hearst.) Now Rich approaches his books with the same mindset.

"My main goal as a writer is always to write something that wastes as few words as possible and that someone will finish reading voluntarily," he says. "One way of doing that is by writing a great book; if you're worried about pulling that off, you can at least write a very short book."

But by no means are Rich's talents confined to 200-word essays about encephalitis and *Duck Hunt*. He's also been a writer for *Saturday Night Live* for the past year (touted as the youngest writer they've ever had, though he's skeptical of that claim), as well as a contributor to *The New Yorker* and the public radio show *The Sound of Young America*. And somewhere in there he's managed to write the first half of a novel.

Before I can ask him about any of this, however, his shaky cellphone signal cuts out for good, and the line goes dead. *SEE Magazine* wishes him a speedy rescue from the woodlands of Maine.



Bookmark These Pages | Books by Roberto Bolaño, Rebecca Rosenblum, and Naomi Klein were among the year's best – at least according to *The New York Times*, *Quill & Quire*, and *The Guardian*. IMAGES SUPPLIED

ARTS NEWS · NOTABLE HAPPENINGS FROM THE WORLD OF LITERATURE

NYT!

Party Like It's *2666*

With the local theatre scene experiencing its annual Christmastime slumber, it's the perfect time for Arts News to decamp to the bookstore and find out which of 2008's hundreds of new titles have made it onto the various "best of the year" lists. First up: ***The New York Times***. Among their picks: *2666*, the posthumous masterpiece by Roberto Bolaño; *The Dark Side*, Jane Mayer's revealing look at George W. Bush's antiterrorist policies; *The World Is What It Is*, Patrick French's biography of V.S. Naipaul; and, most gratifyingly, *Dangerous Laughter*, a new collection of stories by the great Steven Millhauser.

Q&Q!

Cockroach Capitalism

But what about Canadian titles, you ask? We can write a pretty decent book here in Canada, right? ***Quill & Quire*** would definitely agree with that proposition: their favourite Canadian books of 2008 include predictable choices like Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*, Margaret Atwood's debt disquisition *Payback*, and Andrew Davidson's *The Gargoyle*, but also a few lower-profile picks from young writers like Rebecca Rosenblum's story collection *Once* and Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's graphic novel *Skim* – not to mention Jennifer McLagan's cookbook *Fat: An Appreciation of a Misunderstood Ingredient, With Recipes*.

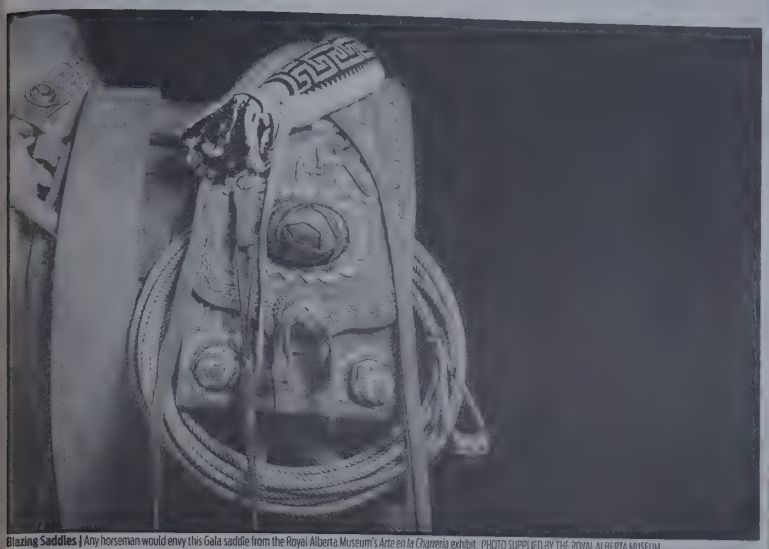
UK!

Awe For *Shock*

An finally, a tip of the hat is due to Robert McCrum from ***The Guardian***, who accompanied each of his selections for the year's best books with a "relationship quotient" indicating the closeness of his friendship with the author. With the foofaraw surrounding Jacob Scheier's controversial win at this year's Governor-General's Award for Poetry, it's a welcome bit of transparency. McCrum's selections include Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (relationship quotient: 0), Peter Carey's *His Illegal Self* (relationship quotient: 8), and Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (relationship quotient: 9).

CROSSTALK · VISUAL ARTS | 751 words

Cowboys And Equestrians



Blazing Saddles | Any horseman would envy this Gala saddle from the Royal Alberta Museum's *Arte en la Charreria* exhibit. PHOTO SUPPLIED BY THE ROYAL ALBERTA MUSEUM

ART BOX MANDY ESPEZEL & JILL STANTON

THE ROYAL ALBERTA MUSEUM REAWAKENS JILL AND MANDY'S DESIRE FOR BADASS LEATHERWORK

This week, Mandy and Jill are in the Christmas break spirit – and what better way to celebrate than with another good old-fashioned visit to the Royal Alberta Museum for some "edu-fun" to entertain us when it's way too cold outside?

Jill: Everyone loves the museum, right? There's a lot to see there at the moment: Alberta cowboys enshrined in paintings and photographs; exquisite Mexican equestrian garb on disconcerting mannequins; little quilted and crocheted pictures illustrating the brutality of political life in Chile; an entire room dedicated to the fact that we've been wearing high-heeled shoes for way longer than evolution would have suggested; and, of course, the always-present *Wild Alberta* rooms where you can literally spend hours picturing yourself living inside those extremely detailed scenes on view behind the glass.

Mandy: I admit, I am in love with the museum. It's kind of one of my favourite places in Edmonton, to be honest. Not that West Edmonton Mall isn't absolutely fantastic during the Christmas shopping season, but it has a surprising lack of dioramas and taxidermied beasts – both of which are essential to the successful spending of a winter afternoon. The last time we visited the RAM, the main exhibition space was devoted to dragons; this time, we've got some extremely Albertan cowboy history and images to take in. Which, I'm gonna guess, you were pretty down with, Miss Jill.

Jill: You know I do love me some old-fashioned cowboys. I was really taken by some of the black-and-white photographs in that exhibit; the ones by Richard Harrington and Randall Adams, in particular, were quite beautiful. I am not sure why I am so drawn to Western and Southern imagery of late, but I sure got a heaping dose of it with both the Alberta cowboy and Mexican equestrian exhibits. There's something about the Alberta prairie landscape that makes you feel inexplicably patriotic for this province, regardless of the fact that the weather is trying to kill you just outside the doors.

Mandy: I highly admire the extraordinary level of eeriness within those old photos, especially the portraits of some of the real hard-lookin' folks. People used to gaze at the camera with an almost Eastwoodian level of contempt. And how about the remarkable handmade assemblage/sculpture things of horses and people?! Martin Schatz's "Singing Cowboy" slayed me with its googly eyes and carved wooden pockets. There are some definite gems to be found here, all right. Gems with googly eyes!

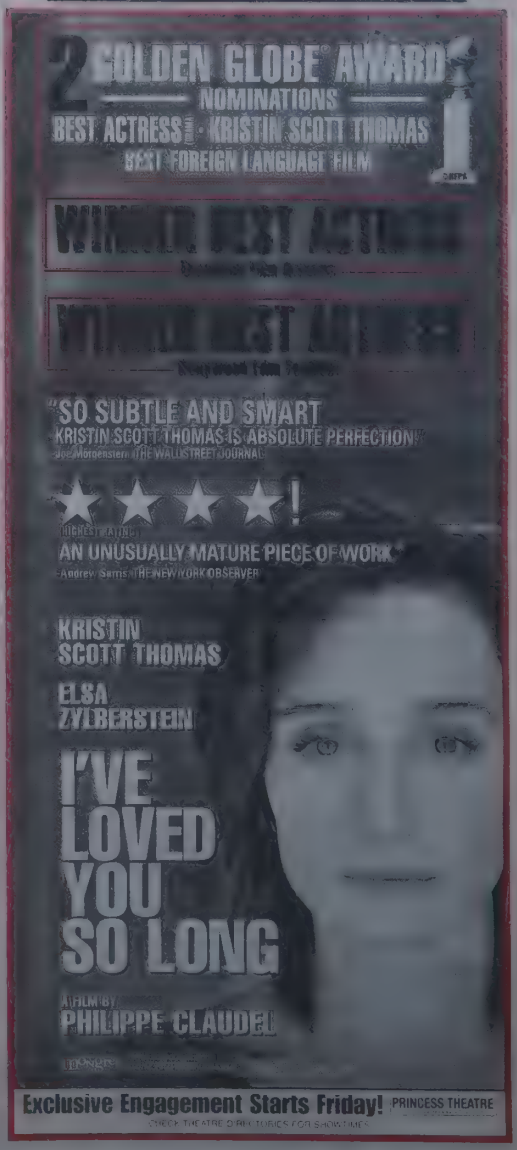
Jill: That one was a real treasure. *Alberta Cowboys in Art* shares the room with *Arte en la Charreria. The Artisanship of Mexican Equestrian Culture* – a transition you were pretty confused by, right, Mandy? I was seriously impressed by the craftsmanship of some of those Mexican artifacts. And come on now, who doesn't want to start dressing like that? Those are some of the most badass leather jackets I have ever seen.

Mandy: I wouldn't say I was confused, but thanks anyway. It's just that the two exhibits don't really have a clear separation, to the point where they appear to be the same show, which didn't make any sense (unless you count the presence of horses as a link). But yes, I would most definitely support your decision to start incorporating the awesomeness of traditional Mexican equestrian clothing into everyday life. The amount of detail on those jackets and dresses is just crazy. And the leatherwork! Dang. I did want to mention the weirdness of using mannequins with obvious European features to display this show. It was a little bit absurd.

Jill: Of course, our favourite part of the museum is, and always will be, the permanent *Wild Alberta* exhibit, where you are greeted by several stuffed animals lovingly placed into life-scale dioramas created especially so they would feel at home. Some of those displays, like the one with the pelican immediately inside the entrance, are so lifelike that you can almost forget where you actually are.

Mandy: The animal dioramas are pretty much perfection. I didn't remember that "night display" one from my last visit. That was quite freaky. Oh, and we should mention that *Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Foot* is also on display. For people who care about shoes.

Jill: All in all, I can't think of a better way to spend a day away from the stress of the season. Spend some time at the Royal Alberta Museum and reconnect with your passion for all things Albertan. And Mexican, and Chilean, and shoe-y!



Slumdog Millionaire

Fri-Tuesday
6:50 & 9:10pm

Daily Matinees
2:00 pm

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BEST ACTOR Brad Pitt
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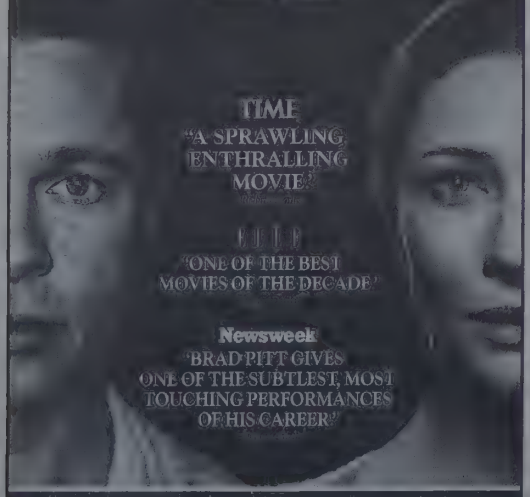
BEST ORIGINAL SCORE Alexandre Desplat



TIME
"A SPRAWLING, ENTHRALLING MOVIE."

ELLE
"ONE OF THE BEST MOVIES OF THE DECADE"

Newsweek
"BRAD PITT GIVES ONE OF THE SUBTLEST, MOST TOUCHING PERFORMANCES OF HIS CAREER"

BRAD PITT CATE BLANCHETT
The Curious Case Of
BENJAMIN BUTTON

PARAMOUNT PICTURES WARNER BROS. PICTURES A KENNEDY/MARSHALL PRODUCTION A DAVID FINCHER FILM BRAD PITT CATE BLANCHETT "THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON" TARAJI P. HENSON JULIA ORMOND JASON FLEMYNG ELIAS KOTEAS
FILM EDITOR ALEXANDRE DESPLAT KIRK BAXTER ANGUS WALL KATHLEEN KENNEDY FRANK MARSHALL KEVIN CHAFFIN
SCOTT FITZGERALD ERIC ROTH ROBIN SWICORD ERIC ROTH DAVID FINCHER
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benjaminbutton.com

IN THEATRES EVERYWHERE CHRISTMAS DAY
CHECK THEATRE DIRECTORIES FOR LOCATIONS AND SHOWTIMES

TOP 10
RINGTUNES

1. Live Your Life, T.I. ft. Rihanna
2. Right Now (Na Na Na), Akon
3. My Life, The Game ft. Lil Wayne
4. Poker Face, Lady GaGa
5. Rock N'Roll Train, AC/DC
6. Hot N Cold, Katy Perry
7. Love Lockdown, Kanye West
8. Womanizer, Britney Spears
9. So What, P!nk
10. Winter Wonderland, Ella Fitzgerald

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EXHIBITS

30 YEARS YOUNG: THE EDMONTON OILERS 30TH ANNIVERSARY SHOWCASE *ART GALLERY OF ALBERTA, #100 10230 JASPER AVE., OCT 9 - JAN 4* Featuring items from key moments in the team's history, including never-before-seen pictures, and an inside look into one of the greatest private sports collections in Edmonton. Info: 780-422-6223.

ABYSS BLISS *FRINGE GALLERY, 10516 WHYTE AVE., DEC 6 - DEC 30* Acrylic paintings by Cynthia Fuhrer.

ARENA: THE ART OF HOCKEY *ART GALLERY OF ALBERTA, #100 10230 JASPER AVE., OCT 9 - JAN 4* Works looking at the construction of such concepts as hero-worship, desire, sacrifice and the sublimation of violence in the creation of group identity through sport. Info: 780-422-6223.

ARTE EN LA CHARRERIA *ROYAL ALBERTA MUSEUM, 12845 102ND AVE., OCT 25 - APR 3* More than 120 examples of craftsmanship and design distinctive to the Mexican cowboy. Info: 780-453-9100.

CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES *MCMULLEN GALLERY, 8440 112TH ST., NOV 1 - DEC 31* Work by Members of the International Visual and Performing Arts Society of Canada explores the differences and similarities of art work from different cultures. Info: 780-407-7152.

HEIGHTS OF FASHION: A HISTORY OF THE ELEVATED FOOT *ROYAL ALBERTA MUSEUM, 12845 102ND AVE., NOV 22 - MAR 8* An exhibition of daring footwear from the Bata Shoe Museum following the rise and fall of the high heel in Western fashion.

IMAGINING SCIENCE *ART GALLERY OF ALBERTA, #100 10230 JASPER AVE., NOV 20 - FEB 1* Exhibit examining the impact of the rapidly changing world of genetics, bio-technologies and human engineering and the challenges and controversies that come with it. Info: www.artgalleryalberta.com.

JOSHUA'S JOURNEY *ROYAL ALBERTA MUSEUM, 12845 102ND AVE., OCT 25 - JAN 4* Visitors join Joshua Loper's first trail ride on the Chisholm Trail and experience the hardships, struggles and joys of a true American Cowboy. Info: 780-453-9100.

HOT PICK
VISUAL ART
Abyss Bliss
Oriyl Vrithra
To Dec. 30
FRINGE GALLERY

THEATRE

CRAZY FOR YOU *FESTIVAL PLACE, 100 FESTIVAL WAY, SHERWOOD PARK NOV 26 - DEC 29* The new Gershwin musical.

DIE-NASTY *VARSCONA THEATRE, 10329 83RD AVE.* An improvised soap opera directed by Dana Andersen. Every Mon at 8 p.m.

RAPID FIRE THEATRE *VARSCONA THEATRE, 10329 83RD AVE. DEC 10 - DEC 20* Every Fri & Sat 11 p.m. Info: www.rapidfiretheatre.com.

LIVE COMEDY

ANDREW GROSE *THE LAUGH SHOP, #1105 LONDONDERRY MALL, 137TH AVE. & 66TH ST., DEC 31* With Graham Neil.

BEST OF EDMONTON *THE COMIC STRIP, BOURBON STREET - WEST EDMONTON MALL* The best in Edmonton's comedy community. Info: www.thecomicstrip.ca/780-483-5999.

DERICK LENGWENUS *THE COMIC STRIP, BOURBON STREET - WEST EDMONTON MALL, DEC 26 - DEC 28* With Sean Lecomber and Shawn Gramiak.

HIT OR MISS MONDAYS *THE COMIC STRIP, BOURBON STREET - WEST EDMONTON MALL* Amateur comedy. Info: www.thecomicstrip.ca/780-483-5999.

KEN VALGARDSON *THE LAUGH SHOP, #1105 LONDONDERRY MALL, 137TH AVE. & 66TH ST., DEC 27*

THE LION'S HEAD PUB COMEDY NIGHT Featuring professional & amateur comedians. No cover. Hosted by Lars Callieou every Sun at 9 p.m.

RICK BRONSON *THE COMIC STRIP, BOURBON STREET - WEST EDMONTON MALL, DEC 31* New Year's Eve special concert presentation.

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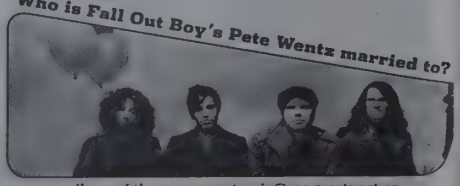

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SEX · YEAR IN REVIEW | 713 words

Bettie Page Passes Away, And So Does *Playgirl*

MY MESSY BEDROOM JOSEY VOGELS

VIRGINITY GOES ON SALE AND CLITORIS BECOMES UNGOOGLEABLE IN JOSEY'S ROUNDUP OF THE YEAR IN SEX

It was quite a year for sex. Extramarital affairs thrived online while the clitoris vanished. We lost Bettie Page and *Playgirl* and gay marriage got left at the American altar. Here are some of the sex news highlights and lowlights for 2008.

Playgirl Calls It Quits

Established 35 years ago as a feminist response to *Playboy* and *Penthouse* (*Playboy* sued *Playgirl* in 1973 for trademark infringement but settled amicably), the magazine could never seem to quite figure out who its audience was: women or gay men, a dilemma, it seems, that followed *Playgirl* to its grave.

The magazine's final editor Nicole Caldwell worked to take the magazine back to its roots, interspersing shots of naked hotties with articles on issues like abortion and equal rights. Publisher Blue Horizon Media wanted fewer articles and more naked hotties, preferably ones that would appeal more to gay men. The schizophrenic focus has resulted in the January/February 2009 issue being its last. The *Playgirl* website will continue, but the graphic content is geared more toward gay men. For $19.55 a month, you can have all the "100% Man Juice" you want.

Online Cheating Takes Up A Notch

In the old days, you had to actually leave your homes to carry on an affair. Now, it seems, our partners can literally lead a second life online. In fact, earlier this year, David Pollard's marriage ended when his Amy caught his online character having an affair with Linda Brinkley's online character on the online computer game Second Life. BTW, guess where Pollard met his first wife? Online, of course. They even celebrated their union with a virtual marriage ... in Second Life. Get out more, people!

Life Imitates Art

This summer, David Duchovny, the actor who plays the sex-obsessed main character on the TV show *Californication*, checked himself into real-life rehab for sex addiction after allegedly cheating on his wife, actress Téa Leoni. A little more than a month later, he checked out, apparently "cured."

Leoni, it seems, begged to differ and the couple announce their split soon after. The story raises much debate about whether sex addiction is real, with some experts claiming it is an addiction on par with drug and alcohol addiction, while others believe it to be more of an obsessive compulsive disorder. Others believe it is a great way to justify cheating on your wife and getting lots of publicity.

Viginity A Hot Commodity

In September, 22-year-old California grad student Natalie Dylan (not her real name, though her picture is all over the internet) partnered with the Moonlight Bunny Ranch in Nevada to auction off her virginity to the highest bidder in order to pay for school to become, get this, a marriage and family therapist.

On *The Tyra Banks Show*, Dylan claimed the auction idea stemmed from her commitment to feminist studies. Dylan is writing her college thesis on "the dichotomous relationship between virginity and prostitution." With bids as high as $3.8 million (U.S.), I'd say virginity has the upper hand in the relationship.

Clitoris Banned On Google

Google has somehow concluded that the word "clitoris" is not safe to be seen by the general public. Earlier this year, sex writer, educator, and activist Susie Bright discovered that if you set your Google SafeSearch filter on "strict filtering" and search for clitoris, you get zero returns. But if you try a Google SafeSearch "strict filtering" search for penis you get 33,000,000 returns. Apparently, "clitoris" is on Google's list of naughty words which are never, ever "safe."

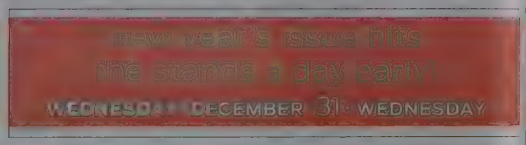
Bettie Page Passes

From being the subject of a federal obscenity investigation back in the '50s to the subject of no fewer than a dozen books, a half-dozen movies, a bunch of tribute songs, countless websites, and more than 1,000 products for sale on eBay, Bettie Page is one of the most iconic pin-up images of this century.

At the height of her fame, she disappeared for three decades, during which she suffered poverty and mental illness, eventually becoming a born-again Christian. She spent her final years in seclusion on Southern California reading the Bible and listening to Christian music. The actress/model died Thu., Dec. 11, at 85 in Los Angeles after a heart attack.

Rest in peace, Bettie, and peace to all.

THE JANUARY/FEBRUARY ISSUE OF *PLAYGIRL* WILL BE ITS LAST. THE *PLAYGIRL* WEBSITE WILL CONTINUE, BUT THE GRAPHIC CONTENT IS GEARED MORE TOWARD GAY MEN. FOR $19.55 A MONTH, YOU CAN HAVE ALL THE "100% MAN JUICE" YOU WANT.



Answering DTMFA Letters Is Quick And Easy!

SAVAGE LOVE DAN SAVAGE

PLUS, IT LEAVES ME ROOM TO RANT ABOUT MORE INTERESTING TOPICS — LIKE THE RISE OF ANAL SEX AMONG TEENS

I'm a 34-year-old straight woman living with a 32-year-old straight man. His daughter is two, and I am the only mother she has ever known. (Her real mother is a crack whore somewhere.)

My boyfriend tells me he loves me, but it doesn't feel like he wants to spend any time with me. I pay the rent and am the only person in our household with a full-time job. When I get home, I want to relax. He wants to go out because he has been sitting at home all day. If he hasn't been at home, he has been running around with his friends. This pisses me off, and I am not afraid to tell him so. His response? "You're just jealous because you have to work!" Damn right I'm jealous! Also, I do all the cooking and don't get any help with cleanup or housework.

Other factors include my 13-year-old son, who has had trouble adjusting to a baby in the house; my boyfriend's outstanding warrants; and the fact that I have desperately wanted another baby for 10 years. What on earth should I do?

Back Against The Wall

Here's one occupational hazard of the advice-column bidness: If you're not careful, if you're not constantly on your guard, you can fill your column with letters like BATW's. Your column fills up with letters from people asking, in essence, "DTMFA?" and you're forced to respond, "Yes, for fuck's sake, DTMFA." (For those of you just tuning in: DTMFA stands for "Dump the motherfucker already.") You may be helping people, sure, but your column quickly becomes a tedious slog, people stop reading, and then you have to get a real job at an auto plant or a hedge fund or a daily newspaper.

But there is one good reason to run DTMFA letters: You can dispose of the letter quickly — keep the baby, if at all possible, BATW, and DTMFA the freeloading, inconsiderate piece of shit — and move on to more interesting topics.

For instance: A new study out from the Bradley Hasbro Children's Research Center found that "anal sex is on the rise" among straight teenagers and young adults. According to a heavy-breathing report from ABC News, straight kids are having butt sex "to please a partner, to have sex without the risk of pregnancy, or to preserve their virginity."

I'm old enough to remember when getting fucked in the ass was considered a sex act, something that virgins, almost by definition, shied away from. But that was before kids were subjected to religious indoctrination masquerading as sex-ed. Abstinence "educators" emphasize the importance of virginity — but they only talk about vaginal intercourse because they figure if we don't tell kids about anal sex they'll never figure out what brown can do for them. But they *do* figure it out. And lacking accurate info, kids aren't just concluding that anal sex isn't really sex. ("Otherwise it would've been covered in our sex-ed classes, right?") Kids are telling researchers that anal intercourse, unlike the premarital vaginal intercourse they were warned about, carries no risk of disease. (I can't wait to tell all my dead friends!)

I wanted to scream and yell about this study — and a DTMFA letter leaves plenty of room — but then I figured, you know, fuck it. I've been ranting and raving about the idiocy of abstinence education for 10 years. Obviously I can't beat 'em, so I might as well join 'em. All my life I've had to listen to fundamentalist Christian bigots like Pat Robertson and Rick Warren — *Rick Warren*, Obama? — fume about all the terrible, no good, really bad sodomy gay men get up to. But I haven't been sodomizing the boyfriend all these years! I've been preserving his virginity.

I've been preserving the shit out of my boyfriend's virginity for 14 years now. If my boyfriend ever decides to marry a woman — miracles can happen! — he'll be able to wear white at his wedding. And his wife will have me to thank for delivering him to her with his virginity intact. (Unfortunately, the boyfriend can't preserve *my* virginity. As a teenager, I had actual vaginal intercourse, under duress, with an actual female's actual vagina.) But until the boyfriend meets the right girl, I'm going to keep preserving the living shit out of his virginity. His virginity isn't going anywhere — not on *my* watch.

My girlfriend's parents are very wealthy and are paying for her education. They also bought her an apartment and give her tons of spending money. My dad is dead(beat) and my mom is a waitress, and I'm paying my way through school. My girlfriend demands gifts and flowers. I pay for everything when we go out. Other than this, she's sweet and attractive. Once I graduate and start working, I'll be happy to pay for everything. But how do I convince her that things have to be more egalitarian for the time being without losing her?

P.S. She's only ever physically affectionate after I've spent money on her.

Boyfriend Reeling Over Killer Expenses

DTMFA, BROKE. And here's hoping that the girlfriend's parents invested all their money with Bernard Madoff, and that the spoiled-rotten little whore they raised has to get a job and start pulling her own weight.

And, hey, here's another interesting study: While straight kids are busily boning each other's butts — the better to preserve their virginities! — gay teenagers are knocking each other up. According to a study out of the University of British Columbia, lesbian and gay teenagers are seven times likelier to get knocked up than their straight peers. How the hell does that happen? Well, gay teens are having straight sex in order "to prove they are heterosexual to avoid harassment and discrimination" by their parents and peers. In other words, gay kids are still having heterosexual sex under duress.

So this is where abstinence education and homophobia have gotten us. Gay kids are having vaginal intercourse and straight kids having anal intercourse. Good work, sexphobes!

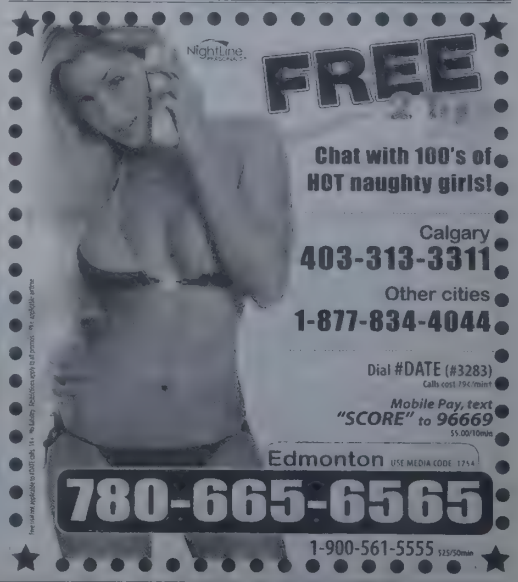
I've been reading your column since I was 13. I'm 20 now and dating a 41-year-old crossdresser. We were friends for six months before he told me he wouldn't be able to spend time with me anymore unless we "got closer."

A couple months later, he told me he is into pegging. Now, pegging is all he wants to do. He also told me that he wants to transition from male to female, but he changed his mind and stopped going to his appointments. All that is background to what has been happening recently. When we fight lately, he makes threatening gestures like he is going to punch me. He also pulls my hair and chokes me. He refuses to apologize and tells me I deserve it. I don't know what to do.

Worried And Sad

You've been reading my column since you were 13. WAS and you don't know what to do? DTMFA — right fucking now, this fucking minute, without fucking delay. Choking and hair-pulling is physical abuse; telling you that you "deserve it" is emotional abuse. And those raised fists — not very ladylike of him, I must say — are a prologue to more extreme acts of abuse. DTMFA. You deserve better, and he — well, he deserves to be pegged by a predator drone.

Download the Savage Lovecast (my weekly podcast) every Tuesday at www.thestranger.com/savage. mail@savagelove.net



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400. Courses/Classes

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1005. Help Wanted

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A large North American Financial Services company is looking for unique individuals with leadership ability. We are one of the fastest growing companies in the fastest growing industry in the world. Training provided. No experience necessary. Opportunity for advancement and excellent income potential for those with integrity and good work ethic. Call Peter 780-486-1101 (W) or 780-904-4294 (M) for an appointment

1500. Help Wanted — Alta.

ATTENTION: Agricultural Journeyman Parts and Service Technicians. Did you know the John Deere Industrial Equipment dealers pay up to 30% more in hourly wages? Why not join the Brandt Tractor team at one of our 5 locations in Alberta or 21 locations across Western Canada. We are seeking resident technicians in Lac La Biche, Camrose and Edson. If you are interested in a high paying camp position in Fort McMurray - we offer a 3 week on, 3 week off shift for commuters. Brandt has been recognized as one of Canada's top 50 Managed Companies for the past 3 years. If you want a great career with a rapidly growing and dynamic company, send your resume to: Brandt Tractor Ltd. Attention: Greg Davidson, 10630 - 176 St., Edmonton, AB, T5S 1M2. Fax 780-469-6891; sneeves@brandttractor.com

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COMBO ENERGY SERVICES requires a Safety Officer for out of town camp work! Fax resume 780-968-0437 or email: heather@comboenergy.ca.

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1500. Help Wanted — Alta.

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1600. Volunteers Wanted

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Committee members and 'day of' volunteers needed for Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada Edmonton 09 Spring Sprint event.† For more information visit www.braintumour.ca and click on "how to help" or email devanoff@keldar.ca.† Committee meets once per month and amount of work depends on role taken.

Looking for male, female and children models
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Ronald McDonald house is looking for day and evening volunteers. Call Joan at 780 439 5437 or info@rmhedmonton.ca

St. John Ambulance currently seeks volunteers interested in gaining medical knowledge and experience.
comserv_ed@stjohn.ab.ca

1600. Volunteers Wanted

Seeking videographer to shoot interviews on January 20. Must have expertise in lighting and sound, and access to equipment. This is unpaid but with possibility for business partnership. Contact elaine@actingandtheatre.com

1700. Employment Wanted

CAREGIVERS/NANNIES with 7 months training and/or one year experience are looking for live-in employment with elderly, disabled or families needing child care 780-709-0005.

2005. Artist to Artist

Actors are needed for a serious fantasy, new two act play about homeless bottle pickers "The Invisible People", performing in mid Feb 2009, directed by Jay Smith 780-455-3828. Pls Phone.

Actors wanted, male & female, for full-length independent film, to be shot in Edmonton in Spring/Summer 2009. This is a non-paying gig but great experience. If interested contact thefilmproject@hotmail.com with your experience.'

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The Alberta Student Film Festival has opened, and is calling for submissions. Submit your film at www.asfilmfest.ca or contact us at asfilmfest@gmail.com

The Works Art & Design Festival is now accepting applications for the 2009 Churchill Square Artisan Market. Please contact marketing.assistant@theworks.ab.ca or call 780-426-2122 ext.234 for more information. FINAL DEADLINE April 15, 2009. Join us, June 19-July 1, 2009.

The Works Art & Design Festival is now accepting applications for the 2009 Churchill Square Street Stage. DEADLINE is February 15, 2009. Visit www.theworks.ab.ca to download applications or email dawn@theworks.ab.ca Join us, June 19 - July 1, 2009.

The Works Art & Design Festival is now accepting applications for the 2nd Annual Smaller than ■ Breadbox Exhibit. Base your entry on the 2009 Festival theme HEAT! DEADLINE is May 1, 2009. Download applications from www.theworks.ab.ca or contact Amber at amber.rooke@theworks.ab.ca Join us, June 19 - July 1, 2009.

The Works Art & Design Festival is now accepting applications for the 2nd Annual Chalk Art Contest. Prizes to be won!!! Base your entry on the 2009 Festival Theme HEAT! DEADLINE is June 1, 2009. Visit www.theworks.ab.ca to download application or contact marketing.assistant@theworks.ab.ca Join us, June 19 - July 1, 2009.

The Works Art & Design Festival is now accepting submissions for 2011 festival exhibit. DEADLINE is August 25, 2009. To download applications, please visit www.theworks.ab.ca or contact Amber Rooke at amber.rooke@theworks.ab.ca Join us, June 19 - July 1, 2009.

2010. Musicians Available

Electric bass player available for working band or funky originals. Specialize in slap technique. 31 years old, great gear, neat in appearance. Call Rod at 780-232-6373

Live band "Amo" booking for 2009. Quality 3 piece band classic rock, CCR and ZZ Top Great band/great price. Phone TK Enterprises 780-966-7394

2020. Musicians Wanted

3 piece rock band looking for 30+ male vocalist/rhythm guitar. Contact 477-3708.

Band: Moments of Rage seeks singer and Bassist needed for original heavy project. Serious inquiries only. Contact Aaron at (780) 474-7076

2020. Musicians Wanted

20 female singer, VERY interested in creating/joining a band. My pref Rock/Blues/grunge/old music. Influence: Metallica, System of a down, Nirvana, Godsmack, Led Zeppelin, Amy Winehouse, Etta James etc. Age pref: 18-35. Very dedicated. Mature, open-minded, creative. Please contact Julie (7804876699/7808607993) or evilshanelle666@msn.com Rock and Roll!!!

A chance to meet local musicians for all of you looking for bands and/or musicians:
There is an event organized at the Baturyn Community Hall 10505 - 172 Avenue Edmonton, AB T5X 5V9
www.baturyn.ca

Jam The Hall - Bring your guitar, bass, drumsticks, keyboard, microphone, amp, effects....
Drop in to play some music on January 25th 2009 at 6:00pm at the Baturyn Community Hall. Suggested songs: Cocaine, Beer drinkers and hell risers, Blue Jean Blues, Saints of Los Angeles. Back in black, Sultans of swing or whatever you want to play. Drums and PA equipment will be provided.

Any age, any level of playing welcome - it is your chance to network with others.

band seek vocals and bass, samples ■ myspace.com/thedaycame Call Shaun 780-297-5352 or Phil 780-297-5580

Band seeking lead guitar player or bass player. Influences are The Band, Wilco and Old Reliable. Please call Rob @ 780.239.1965 or email arfie@bell.blackberry.net"

Bass player wanted to relocate in Medicine Hat, to join various projects. Long hair, 25+. Call Hart Bachmier. 403-977-9316

Bass Player would like to start or join a stoner metal band. Age/gender irrelevant. Lack of ego very relevant. Half decent gear. Pro amp. Call Mike 780-289-1230

Cellist†needed for original project with a male/female share of the lead vocals and mostly acoustic guitar/bass. I would like to find a versatile†cellist who could play ■ variety of styles and, preferably, a variety of instruments. Vocals would be an asset. Contact Reuben at 780-710-5456 or mailto: panda.pro@hotmail.com panda.pro@hotmail.com

Country lead guitar player needed for New Years, within an hour of Edmonton. Phone Bob ■ 780-398-2150

Drummer wanted for established youth rock band. Playing mostly covers.† Influences: Van Halen, Iron Maiden, Wolfmother, Scorpions etc.
Has to be reliable.† We have great practice place on the north side with pro gear available.†Call Eric at 780-456-6509

Funk/Groove Machine seeks charismatic male vocalist.†Call Dan @780.905.5191

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Local established metal band looking for experienced bassist. Call JP at 239-5947.

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2020. Musicians Wanted

Looking for experienced bass player for three piece for heavy alternative rock band, able to jam few times a week, if interested call mat at 780-937-1588

Melodic Metal
Guitarist Seeks members to start new metal band. (Lead Guitar, Vocals, Bass, Drums)
Influences: Bullet For My Valentine, Soilwork, All That Remains, As I Lay Dying, In Flames, Etc. Must have Pro gear and Experience. If possible, email audio samples or press kit to aftertasteband@shaw.ca, or call (780) 289-3684.

Professional rock band is looking for a powerful frontman/lyricist to complete 6 piece rock act. For auditions call: 995-6660

Rhythm guitar player/singer looking for bass player, drummer to start writing original music and also playing cover songs. Call Mark at 780-777-1188

Solo artist needs bass and drums. 6 day orientation. Live off the floor recording and rehearsal. High profile tours. Good mental prep and focus an assist. (403)253-5023 or (403)461-8969

Sportsman Lounge will be booking live music come January. If your band is interested in playing please drop off promo at 8170 50th St., or bring your group into play at our open stage Tuesday nights.

Texas Blood Money is looking for a talented and dedicated bass player. If music is your top priority, you have a great attitude, are willing to reherse 3-4x per week and can be available for tour then please give us a shout! 780-920-0438

Trincan is ■ Caribbean Steel Band and has played all over Alberta. It's a Great place to meet new people, have some laughs and have TONS of fun.

This band has been in Edmonton for almost 25 years. We have played at the opening of Phase 1 ■ West Edmonton Mall, Heritage Days, Cariwest Festival, Carifest Festival in Calgary, Weddings and Private Events. Trincan is ONE OF THE BEST STEEL BANDS IN EDMONTON.
For more info. Cecil @ 780 886 6792 or 780 939 6658.
Website: www.trincansteel.org
The practice times are: Every Friday @ 8:00pm-10:00, Sundays @ 2:00pm-4:00pm(Unless any of those two days falls on a holiday)

2200. Massage Therapy

Chinese traditional body and feet deep tissue massage by registered massage therapist. 443-6221. 11639-97 St.

IF YOU'RE TIRED OF INEFFICIENT THERAPY.
Therapeutic Massage. Heidi
By appointment only
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Transformational Massage, Tantra Massage, Sexological Bodywork, Health Coach with a 20 year experienced licensed therapist. Janet Lee 780-633-6623 www.secretsoftantra.com

3010. Auctions

MEIER GUN AUCTION, Sat., Dec. 27, 11 a.m., 6016 - 72A Ave., Edmonton. Selling prohibited (all classes), Restricted (hand guns) and Non-Restricted (long guns). Call Meier Auction to consign: 780-440-1860.

3010. Auctions

THINKING AUCTION! Guarantee your results with Ritchie Bros. Auctioneers. Whether it's equipment, real estate, livestock or a complete farm dispersal. Contact us today! 1-800-491-4494 or rbauction.com.

3210. Misc. For Sale

$38.95 HOME phone service - Reconnect your home phone! No one refused - $38.95 monthly - $18.95 one time activation - $18.95 unlimited long distance. Call Choice Tel now! 1-888-333-1405; www.choicetel.ca.

A FREE Telephone Service - Get your first month free. Bad credit, don't sweat it. No deposits. No credit checks. Call Freedom Phone Lines today. Toll free 1-866-884-7464.

AFFORDABLE PHONE Reconnection. Bad credit - no problem! Call Tembo Telecom and ask about our new customer special. Sign up online and save $20. 1-877-266-6398; www.tembo.ca.

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BUILDING SALE! "Rock bottom prices" Beat next increase. 25X40 $6,190. 30X50 $7,295. 35X60 $12,400. 40X60 $15,330. 60X100 $36,800. Others! Pioneer Steel Manufactures. 1-800-668-5422. Since 1980.

CONTAINER GUY 20, 40 + 48' containers. Also Reefers available. Weather, Bug and Rodent proof for storage. Delivery available. Excellent condition. Clean city rated gravel. 780-307-4656.

HOT TUB/SPA - 2008 Model, six person, 33 jets, 9 HP, waterfall, LED lighting/ozonator (exclusive chemical free)/fully insulated/complete warranty and 5" cover. Brand New, still in wrapper. Cost $7,900 Sacrifice $4750. Can Deliver. 403-663-9767.

METAL SIDING/ROOFING. Best prices! 36" Hi-TenToughrib 29ga. Galvalume $.69 sq. ft. Colours $.89 sq. ft. IN STOCK. 25/30 year warranty. ALTA-WIDE Builders Supplies 1-888-263-8254.

MONTREAL CANADIENS Tickets, Wed., Feb 11 against the Edmonton Oilers. From $249. each including reserved 2nd deck tickets, a deluxe prime rib pre-game dinner and courier delivery fees. These tickets are for fans in rural Alberta/NWT only. Call Dash Tours 1-800-265-0000.

NEW FULLY LOADED computer $29.99/month! In-house financing everyone's approved*. Right to your doorstep from only $29.99/month: MDG desktop Intel processor, 2 GB memory, 500 GB HD, 22" LCD flat panel, Windows Vista or 15.4" Notebook! bonus 20" LCD TV with DVD! (*call for conditions). 1-800-236-2504.

3240. Travel/Trade

ALL INCLUSIVE PACKAGES. Book online at www.canadatravels.com and save more on your vacations. Use code NCA74327 for discount or call us toll free at 1-800-563-5722.

MAR DE SOL BEACH Club has limited number of weekly vacation rentals at the Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort in Mazatlan Mexico. Any day arrival. Maximum four person per unit. Starting at US$290. per week. January through March. For detailed information email: beachclub@his.com.mx.

TIMESHARE FORECLOSURES - Save 60-80% off retail! Best Resorts & Seasons! Throughout Canada, U.S., Caribbean and more! Call for free catalogue today! 1-800-731-8046; www.holidaygroup.com/sc.

3710. Heavy Equipment

FORKLIFT SNOW PLOWS. Built rugged. Comes in 8 - 10 - 12 ft. Fits on easily, even small forklifts with chains work well. Starting at $2595. Phone 306-445-2111; www.eliasmfgltd.com.

4001. Farm Stuff

HEATED CANOLA WANTED. Buying green, damaged, spring thrashed canola...Buying wheat barley, oats and peas for feed. "On farm pickup." Westcan Feed & Grain 1-877-250-5252.

HORSE BREEDERS & Owners Conference, January 9 - 11, Capri Centre, Red Deer. An annual horseman's mid-winter escape. Education, entertainment, networking and socializing; www.albertahorseindustry.ca 403-948-8521.

ROUND HAY and straw bales for sale. Cheap. We deliver; self unloading. Also a bale shredder $2900. No Sunday calls please. 1-403-843-6380.

4003. Real Estate Misc.

INVENTORY CLEAROUT now in progress. How would you like to be in your new home for Christmas and have $10,000. cash back to boot? Call us to get the details. We are also taking orders on standard and custom designed plans for homes to be delivered in the New Year. We also have a number of used homes available. Stop in and see Pleasant Homes in the Heritage Industrial Park in Morinville or call us ■ 780-939-3584 or toll free ■ 1-866-962-0238.

MAKE US an offer. A1-Homes Inventory Clearance on all in stock homes. Solid wood cabinets and trim. The real country deal. Red Deer 403-314-2244. Airdrie 403-945-4488.

NEED CASH? Home loans to 100% LTV. Refinance, pay debt, or you decide. Free appraisals. Apply by phone 1-877-568-0929 or online www.homeloansalberta.com. Alberta Homes Loans.

REPOSSESSED pre-fab homes! Save 50% +! Canada manufacturer's USA order cancellations. Brand new 1260SF Pre-Engineered package originally $29,950. Liquidation $14,975. Other sizes - sacrifice prices! Green-R-Panel Building Systems. 1-800-871-7089. Fall/spring delivery available!

WINALTA HOMES from $98,900.! Plus, receive $5,000 cash to spend any way you want! Some conditions apply. In-house financing available. Contact Winalta Homes for more information. 1-866-960-2112 or visit us at www.winaltainc.com.

5620. Office Space

Cabinetry shop turnkey. Newer European Equipment Included. 1300 square feet. Shop close to city centre. 477-2311

Small character **CLASSROOM** space available, 10-20 people (weekly or daily). Call (780)477-2311

Unique office and shop space, furnished/unfurnished. Newly renovated, security cameras, all wood building. **OFFICES** starting at **$130**/month utilities inc. **SHOP** space: 1200 sq feet w/2 overhead doors. Call 477-2311, 9AM - 5PM

6100. Cars

#1 IN CREDIT Rebuilding. Need a car, truck, van or SUV? Auto credit fast. Bad credit! No credit! Bankruptcy! Repossession! No problem. Call today and drive away. Call Stephanie 1-877-792-0599. Free delivery anywhere ■ www.autocreditfast.ca.

2002 DODGE CARAVAN air, cruise, tilt, pw, pm, pl, ps, cassette, cd and more. $6485 Call Frontier Honda at 780-939-3666 or toll free 1-888-465-6632.

ADVANCE ENGINE SUPPLY. Rebuilt automotive diesel and gas engines. Edmonton toll free 1-877-465-2702. We ship to your door anywhere in Canada Free!

BANKRUPT? BAD CREDIT? Call us! All makes and models. Professional credit rebuilders. Call 1-866-476-1938. Cavalcade Auto Acceptance Corp., serving Alberta for 16 years.

6100. Cars

DREAMCATCHER FINANCING. Buckle up today! You work, you drive! "0" down! O.A.C. free delivery to BC & Alberta. Apply online: www.DreamCatcher-loans.com, 24/7, 1-800-910-6402.

6400. Recreational Vehicles

CASH FOR USED RV'S 2002 or newer only. Most models needed now! Call 403-240-1212 or 1-800-531-4695. Woody's RV World, Calgary West.

CASH FOR USED RV'S 2002 or newer only. Most models needed now! Call 403-346-1130 or 1-800-267-8253. Woody's RV World, Red Deer.

7205. Psychics

LOVE! Money! Life! #1 Psychics! 1-877-478-4410. Credit cards/deposit $3.09/minute. 18+. 1-900-783-3800; www.mystical-connections.ca.

7245. Misc. Services

A CRIMINAL RECORD? Have trouble getting a job or travelling to the U.S.? We'll clear your name. Better Business Bureau certified. Pardons/waivers. Toll free 1-800-507-8043; www.pardongranted.ca.

CLEAN DRIVING RECORD? Grey Power could save you up to $400. on your car insurance. Call 1-888-623-5050 for a quote. Open weekends.

CRIMINAL RECORD? Think: Canadian pardon. U.S. travel waiver. (24 hour record check). Divorce? Simple. Fast. Inexpensive. Debt recovery? Alberta collection to $25,000. Calgary 403-228-1300/1-800-347-2540

OS ARE YOU sinking in debt? 1st, 2nd and 3rd mortgages - bruised credit - bank turndowns - debt consolidation - refinancing - power of sale - past bankrupt - home renovations. We can lend a hand; www.canadalend.com. Toll free 1-866- i can lend (1-866-422-6536) call now!

7245. Misc. Services

UNCONTESTED DIVORCES and Legal Separation Agreements: Why pay more? Check out our low prices at www.canadianlegal.org. Voted #1 Paralegal - CCA Awards. 20+ years experience. Free consultation. 1-800-320-2477.

9005. Personals

ARE YOU LOSING a loved one to substance abuse? Our program has the highest success rate. Help is only one phone call away! 1-877-782-7409; www.narconon.ca.

DATING SERVICE. Long-term/short-term relationships, free calls! 1-866-512-8367. Exchange voice messages, voice mailboxes 1-866-573-0914. Live adult casual conversations - 1 on 1 - 1-866-522-7131, Meet on chat-lines. Local single ladies 1-866-512-9083 (18+).

9200. Female Escorts

Gothic Angel

Independant
Flat rate. No agency fee
Available anytime.
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80735490-001

9420. Adult Services

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THE ORIGINAL
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$150 special
20yrs experience
NEW GIRLS
www.brownsugars.ca

9160. Adult Personals

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9450. Adult Massage

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Harmony - Seductive, slim, busty blonde in her early 20s.

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COME SAY HI!

SEE you next week!

ASTROLOGY · DECEMBER. 25-31 · BY THE KID

CRUISIN' THE COSMOS

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)
Occasionally you can be as stubborn as the goat that symbolizes your sign. Oftentimes that's just fine, but there are some situations where you need to learn to cave in. This week, when you feel like it's time to fight, try not to flex your might — even if you are the one who's right!

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)
You're often seen as the weirdo of the zodiac, 'cause some folk lack the ability to comprehend that one day the "weird" stuff you do'll be a trend. Well, you might as well live up to their expectations and remove their taboos from your equation. That's right, Aquarius, it's time for a good ol'-fashioned freak-out before the week's out!

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)
You're forgettin' to factor in the price you pay for makin' money the easy way. Livin' on dishonest dollars'll make you older due to spendin' most days lookin' over your shoulders. Makin' a deal with the devil may seem like a plan, but don't expect it to be honoured by your conscience or The Man!

ARIES (March 21-April 19)
Just as mixin' chemicals together creates new ones outta the resultant reactions, you're currently concoctin' a karmic potion that'll set your wheel into serious motion. This week, whatever you do, continue to work on your witch's brew. Mixture's the name of the game, and it's gonna get you your money, power and fame!

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)
Y'ever seen a bullfight? The dang thing just won't give up, even when it don't have a hope in heck of anything but a sword in the neck. Luckily, you ain't him, and the outlook for you ain't nearly so grim. In fact, your struggle'll be anything but futile — it'll be an worth it, you'll soon be wearin' the world's biggest smile!

GEMINI (May 21-June 20)
If you wanna maintain your sparklin' smile, you should be keepin' a low profile. Makin' a big display of yourself this week will get you the type of attention that you don't wanna seek. If your goal is to get very far, you need to be flyin' underneath the radar!

CANCER (June 21-July 22)
It may be true that by bein' humble you're less likely to stumble as you go along your way. Sometimes, though, you can't be afraid to toot your own horn 'cause sure as the day you were born, ain't nobody else gonna do it. This week is one of those times when sellin' yourself gets you to sunnier climes!

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)
You may be ready for your close-up, but if Mr. DeMille's camera ain't trained on you, there ain't no amount of grandstandin' you can do to be anything except a part of the view. Sometimes you're the star, Leo, and sometimes you just have a cameo. This week, if you want glowin' reviews, subtlety is the method of actin' to use!

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)
There's a difference between stinginess and whether or not something's worth it to you — the former's a matter of greed and the latter, value. Keep that in mind this week, when it comes time to choose whether it's money or your soul that you lose. It ain't about what you can afford but whether your values'll be ignored!

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)
Equality ain't simply somethin' that justice has to assess. Sometimes it must be brought about by duress. That's why she's so often portrayed as not only holdin' a scale, but also a blade. This week, your effect on fairness'll be massive, if you take an active role instead of passive!

SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)
Enough is enough! If what you want is satisfaction, it's up to you to take some action. If you sit 'n' wait for stuff to fall in your lap, don't be surprised if it's either leftover scraps or some useless crap. This week, you've gotta do what it takes to make your own breaks!

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)
Your rulin' planet is Jupiter, right? Well, its size can also be used to describe your appetites. Don't sugarcoat it — sometimes they ain't big, they're bloated. Hey, whaddaya expect from a gas giant, anyway? This week, it's okay to indulge as long as you know each time you do so, you'll increase your bulge!

You can contact The Kid at cruisinthecosmos@hotmail.com.

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(each additional)	$0.65 + GST
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DEADLINE MONDAY AT 3PM

Adult Classifieds $19.95/column inch for semi display

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Payment must be included with ad.
Please include GST in payment.
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We cannot confirm receipt of ad. Ads are not guaranteed to run and we reserve the right to re-categorize, edit and refuse private party ads.

***FREE HEADINGS: Artist To Artist, Musicians Available, Musicians Wanted, Volunteers, I Saw You (provided the ad is not for profit) You can list up to 15 words or subject to regular pricing. Free ads run for 4 weeks**

name _____ heading _____ number of weeks _____

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PRINT YOUR AD CLEARLY IN THE SPACES PROVIDED

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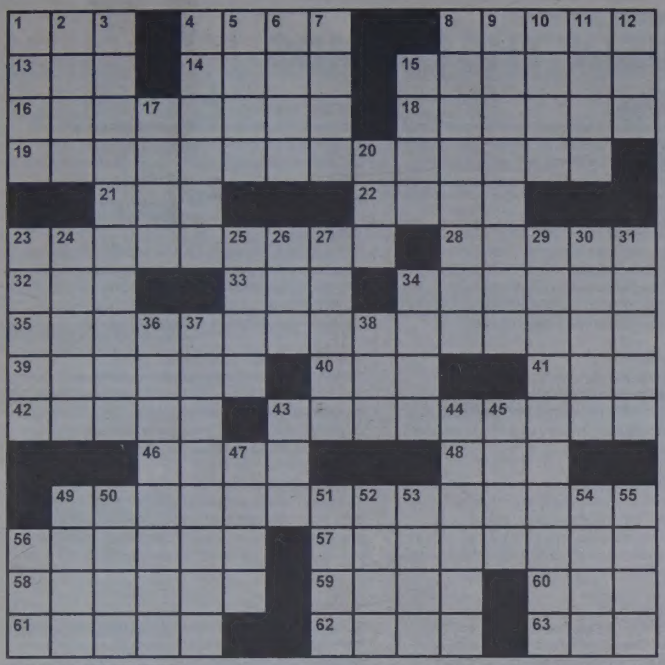

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SOLUTION TO LAST WEEK'S PUZZLE

NOTE FOR NOTE

SPEND TIME LISTENING TO MUSIC

JONESIN' CROSSWORD BY MATT JONES

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ACROSS

1 GPS task, for short
4 Game sometimes found on the back of a cereal box
8 Spanish appetizers
13 Genre of music where guys may wear "guyliner"
14 Nirvana's "Been __"
15 Kentucky Derby drinks
16 Doing a second edit, like a programmer
18 "America's Funniest People" co-host Sorkin
19 Scottish post-punk band exchanged for old French currency?
21 Feline in the sky
22 "Just __ Bit" (song by 50 Cent)
23 "My Guy" singer exchanged for old German currency?
28 Subway fare, perhaps
32 Former Notre Dame coach Parseghian
33 "Isn't it rich, are __ pair..." ("Send in the Clowns" lyric)
34 "Dance Dance Revolution" producer
35 "Queen of the Blues" exchanged for Algerian currency?
39 Got back hair
40 Pathetic
41 "..._ the L I C I O U S" ("Fergalicious" lyric)
42 Nicolae Ceausescu's wife
43 "I'll Make Love to You" group exchanged for Japanese currency?
46 International Tennis Hall-of-Famer Nastase
48 Dix and Ticonderoga: abbr.
49 Springsteen's backup exchanged for South African currency?
56 Classic Clavell novel
57 He's vengeful
58 Part of TAFKAP
59 "__ Know What I Mean?" (Oasis song)
60 Sinatra ex Gardner
61 Brother of Ben Affleck
62 Contest entry enclosure: abbr.
63 Make eggs

DOWN

1 Foamy brand
2 Part of AMA: abbr.
3 Singer's limits
4 Health concern in 2004 news, familiarly
5 "Like that's ever gonna happen"
6 District
7 MIT grad, maybe
8 "Let's get some tunes playing!"
9 The whole time
10 Ball-__ hammer
11 Imitated
12 Tax form ID
15 Monopoly corner with "Just Visiting"
17 Distance for a short run, for short
20 "__ Boot"
23 "The Treasure of the Sierra __"
24 Member of the Disney Princess line
25 "That's so gross!"
26 Actress Thompson
27 Calf roper's handful
29 She played one of the Bundys
30 Play to the back of the room
31 Sheer, smooth fabric
34 "__ Bop" (CD series of children covering pop hits)
36 Helicopter traffic guy on "The Simpsons"
37 Simple, slangily
38 Horse food
43 Wager
44 "In the event it's for real..."
45 Macy Gray's first hit song
47 Fails to live up to
49 Skater Lipinski
50 Big tunes
51 X-ray units
52 "Orinoco Flow" singer
53 They may bruise easily
54 Long-running PBS science show
55 It was also called Operation Overlord
56 Part of XXX or OOO

A "TOM THE DANCING BUG" COMIC STRIP TYPE OF THING

"ONE SNOWY CHRISTMAS"

BY RUBEN BOLLING

RED MEAT

festive flotilla of yule logs

from the secret files of MAX CANNON

8 BIT FUNNIES

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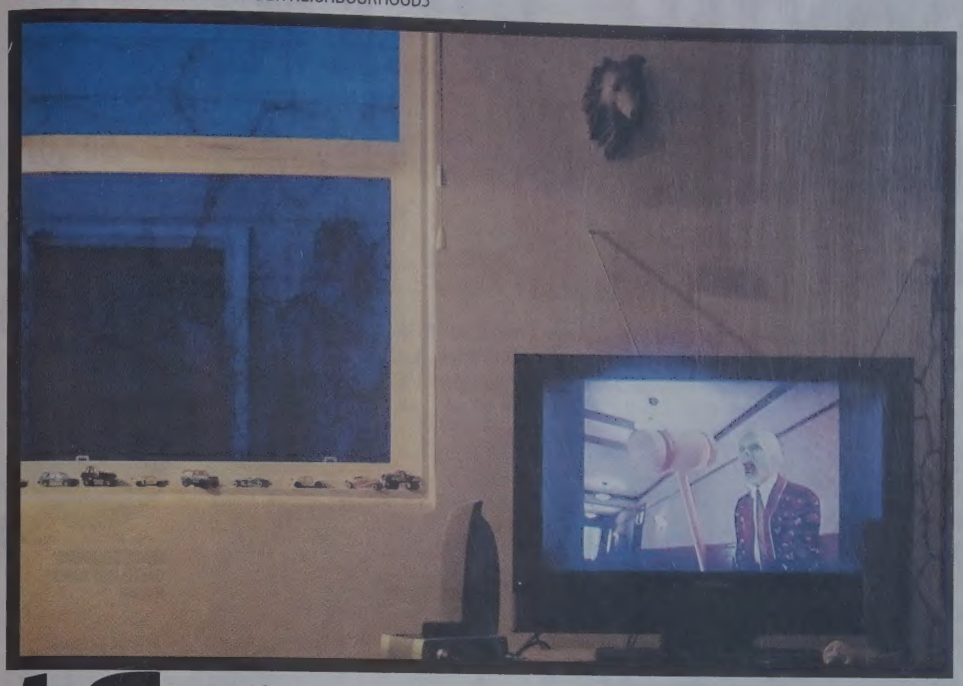

t6g

Jim Carrey as The Mask entertains some friends who were holed up in their warm McKernan home. PHOTO BY MERYL SMITH LAWTON

FIRST PERSON · EDMONTON STORIES · BY MICK SLEEPER | 714 words

A Christmas Miracle — Sort Of

BRIGHT LIGHTS LIFT A PUBLIC TRANSIT RIDER'S SPIRITS

I was having one of those "death by a thousand cuts" days.

Not enough sleep the night before. A frantic rush to the bus stop in the morning, something I always find hateful. A salad dressing stain on my newly washed and ironed shirt at lunch. Discovering that my six-month-old shoes are already falling apart. A misstep during my workout resulting in a painful, uh ... whatever that muscle in your leg is called. No luck on the weekend in locating that tasty Big Rock Winter Spice Gift Pack I've been reading about. Not much of a weekend at all, come to think of it.

There was no tragic news, no illness, no cancelled staff Christmas party, no post-traumatic stress disorder, just ... you know ... all this stupid shit to deal with.

My regular bus wasn't running on schedule, resulting in a freezing wait in the 6 p.m. darkness at the bus stop with some coughing maniac whose hack sounded like a sack of wet toilet paper being hit with a duck. I don't mind taking the bus, but I sure hate waiting for the bus. To escape the cold and Buster Bronchitis, I decided to hop on the first bus that arrived to get downtown, then transferred to another bus which got me close enough to my home in Allendale that I could walk the rest of the way. I disembarked at 109 Street and 76 Avenue, about eight blocks from home.

Allendale has a comfy old T-shirt feel to it that I find quite charming. On a balmy summer or autumn evening, with the sun slowly setting, I would be perfectly happy to be on foot for a stroll through my neighbourhood. But this was December in Edmonton, where the sun sinks into oblivion at 4 p.m. and monsters made of snow start lurking in the shadows.

It wasn't that cold out (hey CBC, –20 isn't front page news, so knock it off already), but cold enough to add more misery to my already foul mood at the end of a crummy day. I was now limping a bit, my leg threatening to lock up in a painful cramp at any second after my gym mishap.

As I trudged though the darkness, I cursed ETS and was filled with disdain for the world in general. Before long, I was finding the cruncha-cruncha-cruncha of my footsteps in the snow unbearably loud, a ridiculous torture to endure. So mediocre was my misery....

Suddenly, there it was. A startling sight in the darkness, half a block away. It was a house decorated – well, no, more like exploding – for Christmas. But this was no ordinary display of lights and Christmas cheese. This was something truly remarkable. I walked towards it like a wide-eyed moth to a porch light. This place had some marvelous and surreal sights. A white fountain. A string of reindeer blinking on and off in sequence like a stop motion animation. A flock of pink flamingos under a palm tree, with rings of blue lights buried in the snow flashing in concentric circles representing the ocean tide. A polar bear next to some penguins, all nodding slowly in mechanized unison. A huge tree entirely wrapped in blue. This wasn't Christmas; this was Christmas on Mars.

The cold and all the crapola on my mind suddenly melted away. It wasn't as if I had some kind of corny revelation and was suddenly filled with Christmas bliss after gazing on this unbelievable display. My thoughts were a lot more square: Who would go to all this trouble? How long did it take? What is their power bill going to be like? But the sheer volume of it made a deep impression. It was the thought of someone expending so much effort on this over-the-top display that made my heart lighter. I felt like Charlie Brown after the gang decides to decorate his pathetic Christmas tree and sing "Hark the Herald Angels."

After about 10 minutes of slack-jawed wonder, I slowly pulled myself away from this wacky Las Vegas fairytale. The rest of the block was dark. I made my way home, pulled out my own little Christmas tree from the closet, and quietly put some gifts underneath it. There was no peace on Earth, but there was certainly peace in my apartment.

naughty & nice

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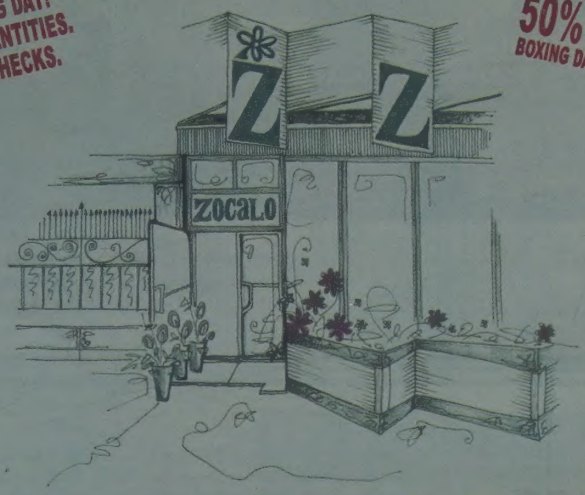

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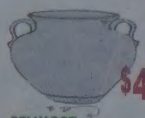

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